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DULCIE EVERTON

VOL. II.



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# DULCIE EVERTON

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# DULCIE EVERTON

## CHAPTER XI.

IT was a thunderbolt—neither more nor less. It destroyed everything—the mother's pretty little Spanish castle of Aston's marriage with Ida Grantley—the father's hope that the sackful of wild oats had been fairly emptied for all time, and that now his vagrant heir would be content to settle down at home as an honest English gentleman should, pending the time when he should make a suitable and sufficing alliance—the sister's dream that her brother's companionship would rouse Martin

to more life, and that perhaps fraternal affection would stimulate, not unwholesomely, conjugal jealousy into some show of special interest. And all these hopes to be shattered in the dust for the sake of an uncertified interloper with a lovely face and golden hair!

Nothing but the laborious self-discipline of years prevented the father from giving way to an outburst of wrath—prevented the mother from finding a doubtful relief in hysterical tears—kept the sister from the blank confession of despair. It was such a miserable overthrow to all the hopes that had been raised by love and self-delusion!

The announcement of this marriage was almost as tragic as if it had been a death. So sudden as it was—so unheralded by hint or preface of any kind—was it to be wondered

at if the family regarded it with suspicion, and considered it almost a disgrace? Society is made up of more than ultimates and essentials. It has its own code of moralities which also command respect; and those who break its unwritten laws must pay even as those who break the law of the land as established by Act of Parliament. And assuredly it was a grave infraction of those laws, as propounded and endorsed by Society, that the heir to a fine estate in one of the Midland Counties should marry all at once, without warning or introduction, someone absolutely unknown to the world to which he belonged—someone who might be all right, but who also might just as well be all wrong;—and when chances are even, suspicion for the most part weights the scale and charitable judgment kicks the beam.

It was all very well for Aston to say that she herself would be his best excuse for the precipitancy of his marriage. Young men who are in love are always convinced that they have secured the one unrivalled She. When in love 'Arry himself is Don Quixote redivivus, and 'Arriet, loud, vulgar, brainless, is the peerless Lady Dulcinea del Toboso. Who has ever seen Love peep through the bandage? Seeing, he is no longer Love. He may be Desire and yet be critical. But Love! His blindness is as essential to his being as its fragrance to the violet—its song to the skylark.

So they said among themselves in the words best suited to each. The thought remained the same, no matter how expressed;—Aston was in love, and the rapturous apologia which he gave for his love was

utterly untrustworthy as testimony, and not to be accepted as evidence worth the paper it was written on.

The answer then, written by the father to this letter, which had cost some qualms and more pains to compose, was assuredly not a cordial welcome to this strange undesignated daughter. It was cautious, as befitted the manner of man Mr. Everton was ; cold rather than hostile—the letter of a man in a waiting mood, by no means sympathetic but yet not determinedly adverse.

They would wait and then judge for themselves by their own light of reason. They regretted the precipitancy and the secrecy. Both father and mother felt the manner in which his marriage had been made as a slight to themselves, and arguments to prove the contrary were useless. Still, the thing was

done now, and recriminations were of no avail. They would be ready to receive both Aston and his wife whenever notice was given of their arrival; and they hoped that by personal knowledge they should come to the state of esteem and admiration which their son so confidently predicted.

There was nothing in the letter to offend, nor yet to cheer. It was colourless throughout; and denied the proverb which says, that a door must be either open or shut. The door of their acceptance was neither open nor shut, and the future was shrouded in a mist which no human eye could penetrate.

In due time came the announcement, half dreaded and yet longed for, fixing the date of Aston's arrival with his bride, 'whom,' he said enthusiastically, 'to see is to love.' They would come the day after to-morrow, by

the afternoon mail ; reaching Green Lanes just in time for the five o'clock tea which he, Aston, knew to be one of the dear mother's favourite functions. He hoped that Dulcie would be at the Hall. He wanted the home-coming to be a real home-coming—a true family reception of his beloved wife—she who was going to bring so much happiness and beauty and delight among them all.

Written with even more love than before, the letter was also more confident. Increased knowledge had but increased his love for his wife, his belief in her supremacy over all her kind, and his certainty of her position in his family. She had but to be seen, to be known, and all the rest was plain sailing—with the Islands of the Blest on the horizon and not a rock nor a breaker ahead.

The spirit in the letter was contagious ; and for all the doubt and displeasure proper to the British temper when touched in its tender places, the Evertons were sensibly more genially disposed to this unknown interloper and uncertificated intruder.

At the hour named the household were assembled in due form in the hall of the old home. The old servants, who had known the young heir since his childhood, and who longed to see him again with the longing of love, and his wife with the curiosity of transferred affection ; the new ones who vaguely anticipated unknown distractions and increased emoluments from this fateful arrival ; the father, pale, disquieted, anxious ; the mother yet paler than he, yet more disquieted, yet more anxious ; and Dulcie, who felt that the whole thing was as a death at which she

was bound to assist in holiday attire and with smiles on her lips instead of tears in her eyes—there they all were—not one wanting, save Martin; and he had been detained by magisterial business. He was coming later, as soon as he had fulfilled his duties. Meanwhile, those assembled waited for the most part in dead silence, broken only occasionally by a word from Dulcie, on whom the whole thing lay like some torturing burden becoming well-nigh unendurable.

Suddenly a cheer was heard. A small crowd had assembled at the Lodge gates, and they cheered the home-comer and his beautiful bride, lustily. It was a good omen, thought Aston, while Elaine's lovely face, which had been somewhat pale, flushed to a delicate rose-pink, as one whose blood is pleasantly stirred and whose emotions have

in them that tremulous kind of sensitiveness which gave Genevieve her flitting blush and modest grace.

Then they drove rapidly up through the park—the inner avenue—the garden sweep—and drew rein at the door of the old home.

Aston jumped out of the carriage and, before even turning to see who waited there within the shadow of the portico, handed out Elaine ; then, taking her by the hand, he led her up the steps and gave her to his father, saying proudly :

‘ This is my wife, father.’

He could say no more. Something rose in his throat and choked his voice—something came to his eyes and blurred their sight—not for fear of their reception—not for consideration of them or what they might feel in any form—but for simple adoration of

this peerless queen he had brought thus among them.

But as he had to control himself for very shame's sake, he took his mother in his arms and kissed her, and she, sweet soul, thought that her boy's evident emotion was due to seeing them all again—and chiefly her—after so long an absence ; and, thinking this, she loved him with all her heart for his unwonted tenderness.

Then came Dulcie's turn ; but by this time Aston had completely mastered himself, and the sister was greeted with the old boyish unsentimental song of :

‘ Well! Everton Toffee! How are you ?’

Meanwhile the father had scanned his new daughter ; and his verdict was after Aston's prophecy. He almost forgave his son for his precipitancy and certainly understood his

want of social decorum. She was indeed superbly beautiful, and the expression of her face matched its beauty. Her mind was evidently as fair as her body—as pure as her sweet eyes. In voice, manner, bearing, look, she was faultless ; and when the elder man handed her over to his wife Elaine's victory was assured.

Mrs. Everton also was charmed. Perhaps she was less completely entailed than was her husband, and preserved just a tract of unconquered country. But she was charmed all the same, and kissed her new daughter-in-law with the grace of a sympathetic woman.

‘Thank you,’ said Elaine in her low musical voice, looking into Mrs. Everton's eyes with the most exquisite expression of gratitude, modesty, and gentle delight in her

own. 'You do then receive me as your daughter? Aston said you would.'

'What else but our daughter could Aston's wife be to us?' said Mrs. Everton tenderly, yet in all her emotion guarding that unconquered tract a little jealously.

As Aston's wife, all that might be. As herself and for herself—caution, and as yet no wholesale surrender!

'And in time, a little for myself,' said Elaine with that wonderful sweetness of look and accent which surely is the very crown of womanly fascination.

'Surely, my dear—surely!' said Mrs. Everton kindly.

'Already,' said Mr. Everton.

'And this is my sister?' then said Elaine, turning to Dulcie and holding out both her small well-gloved hands.

For all her self-control, a strange fleeting flash came into her eyes which robbed them of the holiness that had been there when speaking to the father and mother, and made them for just that rapid instant demoniacal instead.

Dulcie took the hands held out, and felt her heart turn to stone within her. Yes, this new comer, this sister so suddenly sprung upon her, was beautiful and patently fascinating. She had every point in her favour—person, voice, manner—all were simply perfect. Yet to Dulcie, in her strong good-sense and unsophisticated honesty, this lovely creature was stamped as a fraud and she disbelieved in her from the moment their eyes met.

‘She will bring sorrow,’ thought Dulcie to herself as she bent her cold lips to her

new sister's kiss ; 'and Aston has been taken in.'

After this came the turn of the old servants—the nurse and the butler, who remembered Master Aston as long as he himself could remember anything, and who were greeted by the heir and his lovely wife with delightful cordiality ; and then they all adjourned to the drawing-room, where tea was served in the usual fashion.

'I have done well for myself,' thought Elaine, looking round the room, and through the windows into the park and distant landscape beyond. 'All this will be mine some day ; and I have done well. But where is Martin ? When *that* is over, all is smooth !'

Her thought seemed to communicate itself to Aston.

'Where is Martin ?' he asked, looking

round as if to see him in the shadows of the angles or the sunlight of the open—as if he had missed him now for the first time, as indeed was the truth.

‘He had to go to Longtown,’ said Dulcie ; ‘but he will be here presently—I expect him every minute.’

Elaine’s face did not change a muscle. Not a line, not a shade was altered from its sweet serenity, its almost seraph-like purity of composed yet earnest spirituality. As she sat there, every now and then looking out through the open window on the fair English landscape before her, as it was but natural that she, a stranger, should do, she might have sat for one of Botticelli’s angels, only more beautiful in form and almost more holy in expression.

Conscious of the looks cast by father,

mother, sister, all scanning her curiously, she had the graceful pose which is given by self-forgetfulness—or the most consummate self-consciousness ; by absolute naturalness—or by finished art. Keenly alive to all that passed—as it were hearing with her eyes and seeing with her ears, and understanding through the pores of her skin—she conveyed the impression of that entire absorption in the scene before her which left her honourably deaf to conversation not directly addressed to her. Yet her heart was beating a little more rapidly than usual, and her parted lips seemed to ease the breath which else would have come a little too short and thick for one in her attitude of undisturbed serenity and absorbed unconsciousness.

Aston met his mother's eyes as they wandered back from the lovely face that did

not fear the full light of day. They smiled to each other, as do women who look away from a sleeping child and wish to express their love without words. At this moment Elaine looked at her husband, and over her face came the most delightful little flush of pleased surprise—of happy pride in this unexpected meeting of his eyes—this unmistakeable look of love. It was as if she had suddenly awakened to the fact that others beside herself were in the room, and that she was some one of importance.

At this moment the sound of wheels was heard—the sound of a dogcart sharply driven.

‘Here is Martin,’ said Dulcie.

Elaine rose and went to the window. She had heard nothing—so her action seemed to imply.

‘What a lovely flower!’ she said, drawing her hand caressingly over a purple clematis.

Her thought was not of flowers, but of Martin.

‘He must have had my letter,’ she said to herself. ‘And he dare not betray me for his own sake.’

The wheels stopped; a man’s footsteps tramped through the hall; the door was flung open, and ‘Mr. Harrowby’ was announced. Elaine, her back to the window, looked to the door as did the others, and saw once more the man whose life she had wrecked and whose heart she had killed. White, rigid, resolute as a man under torture determined not to wince nor cry out, Martin strode into the room; and, after the first formal greeting to Mrs. Everton and to

Aston, the happy husband took him by the arm and led him to Elaine, saying :

‘ Elaine, this is Martin Harrowby, my brother-in-law.’

Elaine put out her soft white dainty hand—how well he knew it !—even to the rings !

‘ Glad to see you, Mr. Harrowby,’ she said in her sweetest tones—tones which thrilled him with irrepressible anguish and the very turmoil of memory.

‘ The family is now complete ?’ she added turning to her husband.

A curious kind of impulse stirred Dulcie.

‘ No,’ she said hurriedly. ‘ There is still my child.’

‘ Ah !’ said Elaine, her eyes slowly turning from Martin to his wife ; ‘ what happiness for you both ! How I shall love your child, dear Dulcie—my little niece, Grace Harrowby !’

## CHAPTER XII.

SHE came, she saw, she conquered. Green Lanes was at her feet, and nothing was talked of but the surpassing charm and loveliness of Aston Everton's fair wife. There was not a dissentient voice. One and all were fascinated as completely as though she had possessed some magic amulet which attracted love, blinded the eyes of reason, and disarmed both criticism and suspicion. Not Charlemagne's dead leman when cold in her shroud—not Circe with her fatal cup and swinish victims about her feet—not Vivien after she had been taught by Merlin—not

one of all the potent enchantresses in the days that are gone, surpassed in the power of attracting love this exquisite bit of human flesh—Elaine, Aston's wife.

She became the rage, the fashion, the idol of the hour, the angel of the house and the cynosure of all eyes. Criticism of the very mildest kind was held to be disloyalty. She was to be accepted as of right divine—a queen, consecrated by the gods, come to her inheritance. It was the most complete subjugation that Green Lanes had ever known, and that ubiquitous Soul of Thersites which always broods over country places, was for this time at all events banished into space.

One dissentient and only one was to be found—and this was Dulcie. She and her beautiful sister-in-law were secret foes, undetected by the world but recognized by

each other. Dulcie distrusted and disliked this fascinating newcomer. She did not believe in her, body or soul, mind or life. She could not lay her finger on this painted spot nor expose to the world the hollowness of that sweet grace—the calculated falsity of that apparently tender impulse. But she knew that, beneath this exquisite outside, were hidden stores of undesignated corruption—nameless, formless, but still corruption.

With less of that spiritual courage which comes from absolute purity of nature, Dulcie would have both feared and yielded to Elaine, even as Christobel feared yet yielded to the Lady Geraldine. As things were she did neither. She kept her own counsel and no one knew what she felt. Neither to husband nor to mother, neither to friend nor to

father, did she ever let fall so much as a word of womanly criticism on another woman's personality — such as even sisters, even loving friends, permit themselves to say ; but she possessed her own soul, and no other person's praises deflected her judgment by a hair's breadth. Over her and her alone that magic herb had absolutely no power—and she saw this enchanting newcomer, if not as she really was, yet more according to the truth than anyone else in Green Lanes. She had no definite suspicion. She connected her brother's wife in no way with her own husband. Her thoughts never pictured the dark truth of that death-chamber at Tunis, nor compassed the brilliant sins of that gorgeous life in Paris. For all that, the pure-hearted and honest country girl doubted and disbelieved in this clever smiling fraud ; and

when the chorus of adulation rose high and swelled, like the triumphant note of a silver trumpet, her voice alone was silent, or when forced to speak, her praise was measured and her appreciation not ecstatic.

Then the neighbourhood, remarking on this reticence, swore that she was jealous; and the keener-eyed professed to have always seen this unlovely trait in Dulcie Harrowby. Girl and woman, she had ever been jealous and envious; while others lifted up their hands and eyebrows and took it as a new development and not a pleasant one.

At home, at Hayes Hill, Elaine's name was rarely mentioned. To Martin it seemed as if she were a creature perfectly indifferent, too much apart from his daily life and too little regarded to be practically disowned. If by chance Dulcie spoke of her, he would

answer with such cold nonchalance—such almost weariness of a matter so trivial as Elaine's worthiness, or her life in any way, as to cut short the conversation as effectually as if one of the two had suddenly become dumb. All this personal discussion was evidently so distasteful to him, that Dulcie, from womanly consideration, forbore to worry him with her thoughts, surmises, speculations, what not, and gradually subsided into a silence on the newcomer, as unbroken as his own.

But she often wished, and sometimes almost bitterly, that Martin was not quite so silent, so repressive, and that she had in her husband if not a lover, yet a friend, a companion, a confidant and a safety-valve.

It was strange how little intercourse there grew to be between the two houses. Since the advent of Aston and his lovely wife a

nameless kind of barrenness seemed to have replaced the former fertile growth of love. Even the mother was less confidential and more reserved than of old ; even the father was less tender and more grave. Aston of course was changed. That was only natural ; yet Dulcie was bound to confess to herself that he was more changed than need have been, and that the wife had alienated the brother from the sister more thoroughly than was either usual or to be accounted for.

The families seldom met, and even at the first half-formal dinner given by the parents, and returned by the Harrowbys, there was a curious atmosphere of restraint which made those functions painful ceremonials rather than intimate family gatherings. Martin surpassed himself in silence and ungeniality. Aston was abrupt, now on the defensive, now

almost aggressive. Dulcie's efforts to appear unconstrained were felt if they were not visible. The mother was mildly censorious of her daughter wherever she could put in an uncomfortable word. The father was patently displeased by Martin's disagreeable bearing—which naturally enough he misinterpreted from end to end.

The only person who was thoroughly herself was that beautiful bride, blossoming like a rose among all those prickly thorns—a rose, queenly, fragrant, sublime. She talked to Martin, who answered her briefly and never looked at her when he spoke. She caressed her husband with her eyes ; paid sweet attentions to her mother-in-law, whom she called 'Mummy,' and from whom she somehow kept the daughter ; deferred to her husband's father with that gentle air of

unquestioning submission characteristic of the *ingénue* : and to Dulcie spoke with the manner of one making generous excuses for natural defects. She was very indulgent to the shortcomings due to a country education and home-staying habits ; but she made both Dulcie and the rest understand that they were shortcomings and never let one pass unnoticed.

‘ Poor dear Dulcie ! ’ she said with a ‘ pitying smile, when, at the return dinner, Martin Harrowby’s wife gave utterance to one of her characteristic ‘ provincialisms ’ of thought respecting the greater moral worth of the English over all other nations and peoples. ‘ Poor dear Dulcie ! Ah, my dear, if you had travelled more, you would have seen how human nature equalizes itself in all conditions, and how the sum of moralities

is pretty much the same all the world over.'

This was a phrase she had once heard from a philosophic globe-trotter meditating among Egyptian tombs, what time her mother and herself were roaming through the world—the one looking out for chances, the other adding to her acquirements—valuable in the marriage-market for so much.

The phrase was clap-trap enough, but to those idolaters it showed a breadth of observation and depth of thought which, pleasant in a man, in a pretty woman is simply enchanting.

'I think history disproves that,' said Dulcie, whose book-learning was neither shallow nor restricted.

A shade came over Martin's face. En-

chanting with Elaine, with Dulcie independent thought was pedantic.

‘Do you?’ returned the ‘pretty preacher,’ with a superior smile. ‘Scarcely. Those ages which were notorious for certain vices, were conspicuous for certain virtues, which perhaps we have allowed to fall into disuse. I think, my poor Dulcie, if weighed in a balance, you would find that I am right—vices and virtues always equalize themselves,’ she added, with a charming little tone of authority. ‘The manifestations differ, but the sum remains the same.’

‘Which does away with progress, and I do not agree with you,’ said Dulcie quietly.

‘Don’t you, dear?’ returned Elaine. ‘But then you see, you dear little thing, I have travelled and you have not. But we will not argue about it. If you like to believe

you have scored the victory, do so, dear. Aston and Fa, and I am sure you, too, Mr. Harrowby, agree with me; and with this I must content myself.'

She spoke as to a fretful invalid or petted child, whom it was wiser to conciliate than endeavour to convince. Then, without giving Dulcie time to reply, she turned to Martin and said, with a marked desire to change the conversation :

'Have you seen this month's *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Mr. Harrowby? There is such a charming story by a new writer—a story full of those delicate and subtle touches in which the French *littérateur* excels—and indeed, in which he alone excels. Have you seen it?'

'No,' said Martin, speaking with a certain difficulty.

How well he remembered those exquisite talks by the shores of the Mediterranean, where poetry and philosophy had been as the portals to love, and discussions on books ended in revelations of feeling—those talks wherein his very soul was rapt away as in a cloud of golden glory, and passion itself became etherealized and sublimated !

‘ Yet I should judge you to be fond of French literature,’ said Elaine. ‘ And you, too, dear Dulcie ?’

She knew that Dulcie was a defective linguist, and quite unable to enjoy the *Revue des Deux Mondes* or anything else in a foreign language.

‘ I do not read French,’ said Dulcie ; and Martin and the parents felt humiliated. Aston, on the contrary, was elate, and ‘ pea-

cocked himself' again on the superiority of his bride.

'That was your own fault, Dulcie,' said Mrs. Everton, with a decided dash of acerbity in her voice and manner. 'You had governesses enough when you were young, but you were so incorrigibly idle you would never learn !'

'Hitherto I have not felt the want,' said Dulcie gently.

'It would make you a better companion to your husband, dear,' said Elaine, with sweetness and straightforwardness combined.

It was the candour and sincerity, but also the tenderness and pity of an angel, bound to reprove while diligent to help.

'If Martin had wished me to study French, he would have told me, and I would have

done so,' returned Dulcie, with exasperating stolidity.

'All the same, Dulcie, you might have profited more by your education,' put in the father, with grave severity.

'Yes, dear father, so I might. But this is the first time I have been reproached with my deficiencies, or have thought about them myself,' said Dulcie, forcing a laugh.

'The contrast tells against you, Duncie Dulcie,' said Aston, also forcing a laugh.

He tried to make his words seem playful, so as to take the sting out of them. But he failed, and Dulcie felt the smart of the snub.

'Ah, but I have had such singular advantages,' said Elaine, with the loveliest air of personal deprecation and general championship of her defective sister-in-law. 'If poor

Dulcie had had as many, she would probably have made a better use of them than I have done.'

'She could not have done that,' said Aston, in the tone of the self-satisfied and adoring proprietor.

Martin's gorge rose high within him. If at that moment he could have slain his brother-in-law, he would.

Dulcie did not wince. Even Elaine, watching her while apparently smiling at her in the friendliest manner possible, could not detect the faintest quiver. She merely laughed as if in frank, good-natured indifference, saying, as she gave the signal to rise :

'Someone must always be first. So between you and me, Elaine, it is you.'

'What a blessing to have such an imper-

turbable temper !' cried Elaine, with a point of sarcasm in her affected admiration. 'You dear little Dumpling, you have no more nerves than a curly-haired rhinoceros ! I wish I was like you in this. We poor Sensitives come off so badly compared to you calm-blooded pachyderms !'

'But you give pleasure in proportion as you suffer pain,' said Mrs. Everton.

'And you are loved,' said Aston fervently and in italics.

'*Merci, mon ami !*' she answered as she turned to him smiling. Her eyes enveloped his whole being in their caress, then passed over Martin with an almost mocking glance which seemed to say : 'See what you have lost by your precipitancy !'

'She is divine ! That woman is beyond humanity !' said Aston enthusiastically.

Before his father and his sister's husband he could 'enthuse' without indiscretion.

Martin helped himself to wine. His hand shook and his face was like that of a man in pain.

'She is indeed all that you say of her, my boy,' said his father; and Martin, seeing that he was expected to speak, added hoarsely: 'She is singularly beautiful and charming.'

'She is!' said Aston.

Then the conversation drifted into public matters, led into that channel by Martin, who was suffering more than he could well bear. The anguish of an Indian at the stake would have been preferable to the torture he was undergoing.

It was after this dinner that Dulcie noticed the change in her own people, and felt, perhaps more clearly than she could formulate, how

the newcomer was enacting the part of a cuckoo to her in her own home affections. She was shouldering her out of the old nest. Whatever Dulcie said or did was somehow now turned to her disadvantage, always under cover of pitying excuses and magnanimous defence. If by chance Martin were present, as sometimes he was forced to be, Elaine invariably led Dulcie to do or say something which landed her in a hole and showed her own superiority. It was the same in small matters as in great—with dress as with education. She, the graceful woman who dressed like a charm, criticized for her good, and sought to improve, the cruder toilette of her countrified sister-in-law. But she did not fail to ask Martin's opinion, and as it were permission, for the alterations she wanted to make in the personal appearance of 'dear

Dumpling' as she called Dulcie, if she would but adopt them. And when Martin answered wearily, as he often did: 'It is of no use. You cannot improve her,' Elaine was content and felt that this day at all events she had not 'missed her tip.'

Wherever she could plant a thorn she did—wherever she could wound she did: but all under the guise of friendly interest, desiring to perfect her husband's sister, and to make her worthy of her capabilities—and Martin.

And Dulcie knew and saw and read her through and through—all but the motive of this bitter jealousy which was doing its best to destroy her. That Martin Harrowby could have so soon forgotten her, should have so soon declined on a lower love, and could have married this merely respectable little

country girl after having enjoyed the exquisite poison of her love, was gall and wormwood to the woman who, in the secret recesses of her heart, loathing herself for the thing she was, needed the stimulus of external triumphs to give her false self-satisfaction—needed the anodyne of others' praise to stifle the cries of her own self-contempt. Hence her secret vow to ruin Dulcie here in Green Lanes, with father, mother, brother, husband and society alike—to beggar her of love and leave her crushed and broken by the wayside—she who had dared to supplant her in Martin's heart.

Supplant?—had she? Elaine thought of Martin's tortured face—recalled his voice, his words, the eyes which dared not meet hers for very fear of what his might reveal—filled up the broken intervals—bridged over

the long lapses of painful silence—and then, smiling to herself, said half aloud :

‘Supplanted? No! All the same she must suffer and be punished, and Martin shall come to my feet like a beaten hound—and I will spurn him like one. It is what they both deserve, and what they deserve they shall have!’

### CHAPTER XIII.

THE advent of the bride and bridegroom naturally stirred society at Green Lanes, and gave it a big shake pleasurewards. Parties of various kinds celebrated this much-admired avatar ; and of these, garden-parties were the most general. Everyone who had a tennis-court and a few rustic seats made it a point of honour to ask twice as many racquets as could play, were the afternoon twelve hours long—and thrice as many spectators as could sit, were the number of chairs and benches doubled ; and the central point round which

the whole thing revolved was Elaine, the wife of Aston Everton.

Of course the Harrowbys were always included in the invitations to these gatherings, though Martin never went and Dulcie never played. But *noblesse oblige* on more lines than one; and the great people of a district must be included in all the festivities afloat, though they are of no use to the hostess or the company, and are themselves more bored than amused.

Among the rest, the Rectory organized a garden-party as token of this generalized welcome to the newcomer; and it was to be of a kind specially brilliant. For though, by the law of personal fitness and harmonious association, Ida Grantley had been clearly marked out as Aston Everton's natural wife and the future owner of Everton Hall, and

though at one time both mothers had been equally disappointed at the turn things had taken, it would never do for Mrs. Grantley—now the only one to regret—to show a slackness which would look too much like pique for pride to endure or prudence to endorse. On the contrary, her best policy was to give a welcome which might even be a little exaggerated. Thus she would carry off her chagrin with a hand so high that none could suspect the weakness of her wrist—with an upper lip so stiff that none could see the inner quivering of the flesh. Hence the special brilliancy of the garden-party to-day. It was the defiance flung by policy to gossip.

Everyone was there. For miles round the country had been scoured, and every available head of human game had been swept into the rectorial net. The fame of young Mrs.

Everton's exquisite charm had spread far beyond the immediate confines of Green Lanes, and even remote and in general unapproachable magnates had responded to an invitation which, for any less occasion, would not have been sent, or, if sent, would not have been accepted.

They talked much of this party at Everton Hall ; and Elaine expressed a large volume of gracious interest in it, and of commendable curiosity. She had already been to one or two of these functions ; but in the rectorial she seemed to have more than ordinary interest. Why this should be so, only she herself could determine.

‘We will all go and look our very best!’ she said in her pretty naïve way—that manner of the *ingénue* just released from her convent school, which she sometimes alternated with

the etherealized holiness of the saint—the freshness of the artless girl accentuating the conscious dignity of the woman of the world, which was also one of her favourite *rôles*.

As she said this she looked at Martin, who, with Dulcie, was dining at the Hall—and who now felt those lovely eyes turned on him but did not dare to raise his own.

‘Of course you will come, dear?’ she added, turning to Dulcie, as Martin was not to be drawn.

‘Yes, of course,’ said Dulcie carelessly.

‘And Aston and the Mummy and the dear Fa, and you too, Mr. Harrowby,’ she continued, appealing directly to Martin. ‘A whole delightful family party—so English and so nice!’

‘Martin never goes to garden-parties,’ said Dulcie, unsuspecting design and thinking

herself entitled to answer for and thus in some sense protect her husband.

‘True?’ asked Elaine, again speaking directly to Martin.

‘I cannot say I find them very amusing,’ he answered briefly.

‘What a brute that fellow is!’ thought Aston, judging by superficial appearances according to the way of men.

‘What a boor Martin is growing!’ thought Mrs. Everton, following suit.

‘But this one? You will, I am sure!—For my sake!’ she added.

Her voice put on its most seductive silver—her face was the face of an angel intent on soothing human waywardness. Who could refuse so trifling a conquest with such a creature as this for the victor? Who could play the part of a churl if this were the Iphi-

genia to his Cymon ? Surely not Martin !—through whose whole being that seductive voice thrilled with a force so potent and so terrible ! Living in torture as he did, it was at least some consolation that his pain should be made beautiful—that the fiend which looked him in the face should at least wear an angel's form.

‘ I am of no use in these gatherings,’ he said, half-yielding, half-reluctant.

‘ But if *I* ask you ?’ was the reply.

‘ Why should you ?’ asked Martin with affected gruffness. ‘ My presence or absence cannot possibly affect you or anyone else.’

‘ Because I want it to be a real family affair,’ answered Elaine, speaking quickly to prevent her husband's impatient remonstrance with his boorish brother-in-law. ‘ I want us

all to be there ; and it will spoil it altogether if you or anyone else keeps away. I am sure you will come and gratify this little wish of mine to have all my new family about me. So I take it for granted,' she added with a lovely little smile of triumph ; and Martin, turning away his head, said : ' All right,' huskily.

Then said Dulcie to herself :

' Why does not Martin look at her when he speaks to her ?—why is he so strange in manner, so unnaturally constrained and short-tempered to her ?—why does she make such a point of speaking to him whether he is rude or not ?—as if she wanted to soothe him—or something else ?'

She asked herself these questions and she got no answer. But her blood seemed to gather round her heart as it does in a moment

of nameless dread, when we wake from a troubled sleep, and fear—we know not what. And Dulcie had now quite suddenly the almost superstitious feeling of rocks ahead and perils in the way by which she was walking.

The day came, and the weather was all that it should be to make a garden-party a supreme success. To be sure a few clouds were about, but Hope makes a satisfactory kind of guide for so long as her strength holds out ; and for the rectorial garden-party she was in full force and vigour. Those few dark clouds would surely disperse betimes, and the merry-making on the smooth-shaven lawn would not be disturbed.

‘Then you are really coming?’ asked Dulcie of her husband, as the dogcart drove up and Martin came into the hall, dressed

with a certain care to which he had long been a stranger.

‘Yes,’ he answered not a little curtly. ‘Why not?’

A quick thrill of jealousy struck an unmelodious note in Dulcie’s heart. How often had she, the wife, prayed her husband to accompany her, and yet, never once had he consented; while now, for this stranger, at the first word he yielded, and broke through a habit which had made him so conspicuous in the place. The breaking would make him more conspicuous still.

But Dulcie’s moral evolution had begun long ago, and she could conceal her thoughts and feelings even better than Martin himself. For he showed that something was amiss though he did not reveal what; and she did not show even that.

‘It is very nice to have you,’ she said, not answering the question, but speaking in that tone of friendly indifference which was what Martin liked best in her. She had found out in the first month that anything warmer or more sentimental was unwelcome.

‘We shall be late,’ said Martin a little irritably.

Dulcie, glancing at the clock, saw that they would be early. This too, she kept to herself; and the two, mounting their trap, drove rapidly away—Martin fighting with the wild beasts within him, in silence, and Dulcie, like a questing hound, conscious of something hidden near at hand but as yet unable to find the true scent.

They reached the Rectory immediately after the Everton party had arrived—and they were the first two families on the

ground. As they came across the lawn Elaine rewarded her poor martyred slave with one of those looks of love which are as eloquent as words and as warm as a caress. It was a look which turned the knife in the miserable man's gaping wound and made him feel that he must either break through every bond of honour and righteousness or go into the shrubbery, there by the side, and blow out his brains without more ado.

The two women stood for a moment side by side. Dulcie was in one of those plain tailor-made tweed dresses which afford no scope for ornament and are the very reverse of poetic—the very acme of the flattest prose. It was a dress which Martin knew by heart, and with which familiarity had bred neither liking nor distaste. Dulcie's dress had never troubled him in any way. Gauze or horse-cloth,

it was all the same to him ; and he cared no more for her looks. Less pretty now than she had been as a girl, he was too indifferent to her to exaggerate her comparative falling off in beauty into positive plainness. She might have been far prettier than she was, and far plainer too, and he would not have seen the change on either side. She was a fact to him, not a person ; and since Elaine's arrival, the vitality, so to speak, of her facthood had declined, and she was as though set farther off and reduced in size.

But to-day—Dulcie standing there side by side with Elaine—something seemed to fall from Martin's eyes, which changed what had hitherto been blind indifference into keensighted disapprobation. As he contrasted these two—the woman he had made his wife and the mother of his child, and the woman whom

he loved till love was agony and life a torture—he wondered how he had ever endured the presence of the one, filled as was his heart with memories of the other. Dressed in some exquisite confection of silk and shining beads—of lace that fell like a filmy cloud about her graceful form and enhanced the loveliness it made pretence to veil—every point of her attire perfect in fit and taste and general harmoniousness—her beautiful face like some poet's dream incarnate—Elaine stood a head and shoulders above all the women of Green Lanes, but side by side with Dulcie she was as Helen to a handmaid. As woman with woman she annihilated her. She made her look shabby, old, provincial, uninteresting. That Parisian toilette, supreme in elegance and beauty, showed Dulcie's tweed as no better than a workhouse gar-

ment, badly cut and ungracefully worn. The manner which combined every shade and hue of feeling, thought, conventional courtesy and personal grace, threw the spell of intellectual poverty, of provincial abruptness and spiritual meagreness over Dulcie, little as that spell was true. In all ways the contrast was damaging to the one who ought to be dearest—and agonizing to Martin. And, for the first time since his marriage, a sudden revulsion that was almost loathing took the place of his former quiescent indifference, and transformed it into active horror.

Then he looked at Aston, and the happiness in his face seemed like an insult—like a challenge—which Martin swore to himself he would accept. *He* to have the right to wear this broad smile of assured proprietorship? *He*, the latest comer to be the successful

rival? No! that card-house, at the least, had to be blown down, let what would come to ruin with it!

The people began to arrive in their numbers, and the beautiful bride was more than ever the cynosure. All who knew her crowded round her—all who did not know her were formally presented. Martin watched the whole thing from under the shadow of a hornbeam, where he had seated himself with the young son of a neighbour, to whose freshman's prattle he was making a praiseworthy show of attending. And ever and anon he saw how Elaine's glorious eyes wandered over to him, and how something which he alone saw and read came into her face when she looked. It was an unspoken word of regret, of enquiry, of invitation. It meant to his mind a desire for a secret inter-

view—that being what he had already determined on for his own part.

But the difficulty was—how was it to be done? Surrounded as she was, to take her away alone in the face of all would be simply impossible. Granting that she strolled with him down that winding walk and so on to the shrubbery, half a hundred would follow in her train. It was doubtful if he could even get so much free space as to be able to whisper time and place for to-morrow. Yet it had to come. Whatever might befall—through whatever obstacles a way had to be made—that had to come:—He and Elaine must meet, and the explanation now wanting must be given.

A moment of diversion came. The Duke's carriage drove up to the gate and the Duke and Duchess, the young Marquess and the

pretty débutante, came on to the lawn. Then the host and hostess went forward to meet them ; the crowd turned from the Star to the Sun ; and Martin, seizing his opportunity, left his boy-companion in the middle of a sentence and, going up to Elaine, said in a low voice :

‘ Come with me, into the shrubbery.’

‘ Not now ; I will later,’ answered Elaine, turning as the ducal party came to where she stood, curious to see this marvel with whose almost mythical charm the whole country was ringing.

Introduced, they appraised her ; and their appraisal fell short of the value put on her by Green Lanes. Knowing the real thing and inheriting the *flair*, they detected the imitation and unearthed the adventuress. That imitation was marvellously well done, and they gave the beautiful *postiche* credit

for her tact and fine discrimination. None the less, she was *postiche* and not real—strass and not diamond.

With perfect good-breeding, but pitiless dissection, they made her reveal her essential ignorance of things and people with which she professed a happy class-familiarity. Cities she knew, but not palaces nor private houses of renown ; languages, but not Courts nor magnates. A very few touches probed her on these points, and princes and dukes who with others were her intimate friends scattered like wind-flowers up and down the world, became, under their covert cross-examination, names and nothing more.

As he, the Duke, had been a great traveller, and naturally a *persona grata* at all the Courts of Europe, he could gauge the accuracy of this fair woman's knowledge as easily as a

sailor could measure the depth of a pond. Even in Paris she had not been amongst *la haute volée*; and in Vienna had evidently been assigned to the drinkers of skim-milk rather than to the 'cream of the cream.'

As she made some grand mistake at a venture about the Viennese Court, the Duke looked at the Duchess, and the Duchess looked at the Duke; and Elaine never knew whether she had hit the mark right in the centre, for which they mutually commended her, or had gone wide, for which they mutually derided her. The impassivity of English good-breeding made everything so much the more difficult and this interview, apparently so full of interest and social honour, was in reality an ordeal which the beautiful fraud had to undergo without

wincing, or showing that she knew it to be an ordeal at all.

When they had probed and proved her, the Great People turned aside; and, being kindly folk, who understood the social value of their position without being personally vain or ridiculous, they wrapped up in the mantle of their friendly sociability sundry of the smaller fry, whom they thereby made happy for weeks to come. They were specially friendly to Aston, and the Duke talked to him long and earnestly about Africa—Uganda being a question of great interest with him, and the slave trade one on which he had made himself a Parliamentary name.

This gave Martin his chance. Drawing Elaine a few steps apart, under pretence of looking at the flowers they turned into the winding path that led into the shrubbery—

near to that secluded harbour which Martin remembered as a hiding-place when he was a boy—which the very birds did not invade. And before anyone well knew that they had gone, they had passed into the friendly shelter of the trees, and soon were completely out of sight.

Then Martin, turning face to face with his lost love, took her in his arms and kissed her sweet lips under the shadow of the English wood, as he had so often kissed them on the shores of the Mediterranean.

And she—as if overpowered by the sudden inrush of old love—the memory of the past, regret for the present, and woman's weakness in the presence of passion all combined to her self-betrayal—she lay in his arms as one lost to all but the joy of this reunion—the sweet, sad madness of this delightful crime—this sinful ecstasy stolen from heaven by hell.

## CHAPTER XIV.

SHE struck the first blow in the duel of loving reproach that had to be fought between them.

‘Why did you marry?’ she half sobbed. ‘Oh! why had you not more faith and patience?’

‘I was mad, and broken-hearted,’ he answered.

‘And to marry such a woman!’ said Elaine, still sobbing, dry-eyed. ‘After having loved me—and been loved by me—to find your consolation in such a person as Dulcie! Why not a maid-servant at once!’

To give *me* such a successor ! It was an insult !

She said this with a curious mixture of outraged pride and personal love, that was like the blending together of black and gold—of fiery crimson and shining silver.

‘She has never been your rival,’ said Martin, with a sad kind of fervency which was of itself poor Dulcie’s essential bill of divorcement.

‘Yet she is the mother of your child,’ returned Elaine—‘the child that might have been mine if you had had patience and waited.’

‘Don’t !’ groaned Martin. ‘I am miserable enough as things are ; do not make me more so, else you will kill me outright !’

‘You deserve to be miserable,’ said Elaine. Then, to soften the cruelty of her words, she

flung herself anew into his arms, and said, with infinite pathos: 'And what you suffer, darling, I suffer also!'

'Yes. You condemn me, but you have done worse,' said Martin, catching at the admission as the drowning man catches at the straw. 'I married a stranger to you—to our secret life of love; you married my brother-in-law and came here, where I live as his wife—here of all places in the world, and Aston of all men! Which is worst? Who has done the greatest wrong and wounded the other most severely?'

'How should I know that he was your brother-in-law?' retorted Elaine. 'In point of fact, I did not until I had been married for some days. Do you think he had nothing better to do than to speak to *me* of that awful sister of his? He was too much in love

with me and too much ashamed of her for that!’

He sprang at the admission.

‘Yet you married, by your own showing, knowing nothing of what had become of me,’ he said quickly.

‘What could I do!’ she returned, on the defensive, yet with such sweet reasonableness as made her infinitely beautiful and free from blame. ‘Alone in Tunis; my bankrupt husband dead; with no money; no friends—abandoned by you who might then have been my salvation, and too proud to turn for help to the friends who had known me in my prosperity—what else could I do? An honest English gentleman offered me a home, protection, means of living :—I was compelled to accept him, wanting you who ought to have stood in his place. Love him or not, I was compelled.’

‘But you do love him,’ said Martin jealously. ‘You show it—plainly.’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘Just as much as you love his sister—your wife,’ she answered, emphasizing her disdain. Then, looking up with one swift half-shy, half-caressing glance, she added softly: ‘I have never loved but one man in the world—and he failed me!’

Martin set his teeth like one in mortal agony.

‘It is more than I can bear,’ he groaned rather than said. ‘I may have sinned, but I do not deserve this suffering.’

‘To have forgotten me so soon!’ said Elaine, harping womanlike on the discordant string. ‘And to have forgotten me for such a woman as this Dulcie!’

‘I did not forget you,’ pleaded Martin.

‘My one sole only love you have ever been and ever will be. I cannot forget you! I could not if my heart were torn out of my body!’

‘Nevertheless, you married,’ she reiterated, ‘and in such hot haste! A little patience and I should have been yours in the face of the world—yours for life! And all this happiness you threw overboard as so much lumber not worth preserving — and made yourself comfortable with—Dulcie!’

She pronounced that name as if it had been the synonym for all that was mean, low, hideous and contemptible. It was the ‘filthy Moor’ and the ‘satyr to Hyperion.’

‘I have told you I do not love her. I never did,’ said Martin.

‘Then why did you marry her?’ asked Elaine.

‘I was mad,’ he said sullenly.

‘And she was willing,’ sneered Elaine.

‘Not over, but willing enough,’ he returned, making a feeble stand for his poor wife’s honour. ‘She loved me.’

‘Poor Martin!’ said Elaine with sweet compassion. ‘You deserved a better fate.’

‘She is good,’ said Dulcie’s husband, still feeble and half-hearted.

‘If we are here to discuss the merits of Mrs. Harrowby we will go back to the lawn,’ said Elaine, speaking with the pride of a queen to whom her groom has been wanting in due respect. ‘I thought the man who says he loves me would have had something else to talk about after all these years of separation.’

‘My God! how cruel women can be!’ said Martin, turning away so that she should not see his face.

Lost in the very mire of love as he was, he did not care that even this beautiful enchantress, for whom he was sinning and fain would die, should fathom the depths of his despair and learn the full extent of her fatal power. It was the last flicker of his manly pride—of his moral modesty.

‘How should we not be cruel, seeing how cruelly we are treated?’ said Elaine reluctantly—her pride as it were softened and made pathetic by love. ‘Do you think that you alone have the right to regret? Do you think it easy for a woman like myself to forgive an inconstancy which has given me such a successor—and after all that I was to you!—an inconstancy which has forced me to marry a man I do not love, because the one I do deserted me!’

‘ I cannot bear this,’ said Martin wildly.

‘ I cannot live under it all !’

She laid her hand on his arm and looked at him, her beautiful face instinct with tenderness and eloquent with pleading.

‘ You must live for my sake,’ she said. ‘ I could not endure my life here without you. The hope of seeing you like this, for a few moments alone, when I can be free and natural—that is all I have to support me in my life of ennui and restraint. Yes—darling—you must live, for me. Hush ! they are coming,’ she added rapidly ; and then in a quite natural tone of voice she plunged *in medias res* concerning Tunis, as if it were a continuous narrative she was bringing to an end, while slowly walking to meet the advancing voices.

And just as Aston and Mrs. Grantley came

up, she was saying in the most natural manner possible : ' I shall always look upon Tunis as my Mecca.'

Aston took her hand and kissed her dainty wrist. Among such close friends as they were, what need of formality ?

Elaine said a few words in Arabic. They had learnt them together at Tunis, she and the tall handsome Englishman whose heart she had won in such hot haste. Translated they said : ' My soul, I love you !'

And Aston, too sincere himself to be suspicious, was perfectly content with a reception which assured him, as so often before, of his adored wife's dear love and loyal happiness in his presence.

After a few words to Mrs. Grantley, Martin went back to the lawn, looking for Dulcie so that he might leave this place of

agony now on the instant—to carry back to his home something that was worse than Death and more terrible than Judgment.

He looked for his wife in vain, fuming at her absence. Why did they all speak to him as they did, clustering about him like so many flies? What was in his face or bearing that attracted them? Did he wear passionate anguish as a transparent sign upon his breast, so that all could note and read? In his overwrought state the company on the lawn, already greatly diminished, seemed to have increased by tens and twenties since his stealing away with Elaine, to have that bitter-sweet discourse which had added so much to his sorrow and so wildly increased his love. Half mad as he was, he saw nothing aright, and it was more by virtue of instinct than conscious endeavour that he

bore himself with any kind of propriety. He was conscious of but one thing—his desire to escape to the safe solitude of home.

But Dulcie did not appear. Where was she? What could have become of her? She never was to the fore when he wanted her! he thought with the selfish injustice of suffering. And those people who thronged round him and spoke to him, as his jaundiced imagination fancied they did, with curious smiles and questioning eyes—what did they see?—how much did they know?

In truth they saw and knew nothing, and did not so much as brush by the outer skirts of the thing that was. They only thought among themselves that Martin Harrowby was in a viler humour than usual, and that he was both bearish and detestable. This was their prosaic interpretation of his highly

wrought and tragic mood ; and when they had said this, one to the other, they dismissed from their minds his gloom, his curt answers, his unpleasant scowl, and turned to something more enlivening,—the Duke's fine manner ; the Duchess's magnificent mantle ; Mrs. Aston's beauty ; and one another's deficiencies.

After a time, the bride and bridegroom returned from the shrubbery, and in their wake came Mrs. Grantley and Dulcie. Aston still wore that look of radiant proprietorship which was such a trial to poor Martin, and Elaine was spiritual, loving and transcendent, as if celestial harmonies sounded in her soul and translated the more material life of earth to supernal purity. Mrs. Grantley was heroically sympathetic ; but with ever that sore place in her heart smart-

ing with unavailing regret. And Dulcie was — what ? The same as ever to casual observers, and yet with a certain subtle difference which was to be felt rather than described.

Her face looked drawn and pale, save for two bright crimson spots on her cheeks, like the stain of blood left by a murderer's hand. Her lips were compressed ; her manner had the artificial quietness of one inwardly violently disturbed. Her eyes were bright and hard and glittering, and avoided the eyes of those to whom she talked. She was no more like the girl who had essayed her first efforts in self-mastery, when her brother left home for African adventure and she would not add repining to grief, than the successful hero is like the puling infant. The life of silence, self-suppression and disappoint-

ment, led since her marriage, had left its impress on her whole nature ; and to suffer without complaint or the need of sympathy was part of her daily experience.

But *this* was worse than anything she had yet known. Bit by bit her modest cloud-castles of married happiness—of conjugal love—had been blown into space ; but at least she had believed that she possessed all there was to have. If the harvest were meagre no one else had carried the crop before her. What she had heard to-day, however, when seated in the arbour, where she had taken refuge from the curious sense of weariness and mortification that had possessed her, was the total destruction of everything. She was now beggared of all possible happiness ; ruined in peace and pride, in love and respect, in heart and conscience alike. Yet

for all sakes she must keep her own counsel and let no one share her knowledge. For her brother's happiness, her husband's repute, the honour of the family, the continuity of her own home life and to keep that home together, for the sake of the child—on every account she must be silent, and bury deep in her own heart the knowledge of all this guilt and shame, this falsehood, this treachery, this tangled web of infamy.

She was like one slowly strangled by a spectral hand with which she could not try conclusions. And the fiend who was destroying her—this false and evil-hearted Elaine—had to be left in her pride of place, triumphant and unchecked to the end.

And then her own sudden revulsion against her husband! That was perhaps the most painful thing of all. Such love as she had

given him, though not of the tragic and overwhelming kind, had been honest, true, sincere, and neither shared nor stinted. She had loved him in proportion to her respect for and belief in him. He had been a disappointing lover but he was an honourable man, and she could give, and did, far in excess of what she received. But now—she had nothing; neither love nor respect—neither trust nor reliance. Martin Harrowby, her husband and the father of her child, was a cheat and a liar, dishonourable and dishonest, treacherous, false, worthless—bracketed with Elaine and not a whit better! It was a death far worse and more painful than the loss of physical life. She would far rather he had died while she had believed in him than have left her thus morally widowed and wrecked! And she had to bear it all—and

not show the watching world so much as the very shadow of the hideous truth.

‘Where have you been! I have been waiting for you for the last hour,’ said Martin irritably.

‘I am ready,’ said Dulcie; and with the word she began to make her farewells.

Elaine came up to her. Those rhythmic graceful movements, where all was so finely balanced, contrasted with Dulcie’s somewhat abrupt and constrained gestures—contrasted to such disadvantage here, to such increase of admiration there!

‘Good-bye, dear. What a lovely colour you have!’ she said, bending her sweet face as if to kiss those burning blood-red cheeks—that closely drawn line of lip.

‘Good-bye,’ said Dulcie a little hoarsely, and visibly refusing the kiss.

Martin saw this rapid by-play and his heart swelled against his wife. It seemed to him the very last extreme of insolence that she, Dulcie, the inferior person, should refrain from taking advantage of Elaine's proffered grace. That grace was more than she deserved ; and he was angry with the one in proportion to his mad, blind passion for the other.

The incident, however, had to pass without comment, and the two drove off to Hayes Hill.

The drive was absolutely silent. Martin was absorbed in his own thoughts, Dulcie in hers ; and both were full of so much anguish as to leave little room for the amenities of intercourse. Suddenly Martin, whose whole nature seemed to have become warped by the baleful influence of this supreme enchan-

tress, turned his head abruptly towards Dulcie, and said in an aggrieved voice :

‘ I must say, Dulcie, you do not give yourself much trouble to be courteous or agreeable at home or abroad !’

‘ No ?’ said Dulcie, as if waking from a dream. ‘ I thought my silence was what you would like best.’

‘ Pshaw !’ said Martin peevishly. ‘ And I suppose you thought your rudeness to your sister-in-law was what I should like best,’ he added, with a dash of ferocity to broaden and accentuate his peevishness.

‘ You must leave that to me, if you please,’ returned Dulcie sternly—in a voice he had never heard her use before. ‘ In this I act as I think right, and I decline to be interfered with.’

How true it is that conscience makes

cowards of us all ! Her tone and manner in a sense over-awed Martin. He did not believe that she knew anything, but he himself had cut the ground of remonstrance from under his own feet ; for he was not yet corrupted to the point of forcing from his wife complaisant attentions to his former mistress.

He contented himself by saying crossly : ‘ You do yourself no good by showing temper in public,’ and tortured as he was, poor soul ! he did not see that the cap he had made for Dulcie’s head, fitted with most cunning exactness his own.

The dinner was as silent as the drive had been ; and the evening saw no relaxation in the dumb division which had fallen between them. Each was wondering as to where that particular path on which he, or she, was walking, would end. Martin was dimly fore-

seeing the awful shape of suicide ; Dulcie was arranging the details of her life as it was now to be led. There should be no recrimination, but there should be absolute severance between her and her husband. Nothing should be explained but all should be understood. And the world should not be taken into their confidence any more than it had hitherto been. It should be a secret kept faithfully between them both—undeclared, unpublished, but prepotent in influence. That ‘bill of divorcement’ had been thrown in her way, and she accepted it.

‘Good-night, Martin,’ she said, rather early in the evening. ‘Grace is not very well, and I have brought her down to my room. Yours is the blue room in the north wing.’

‘Good-night. All right,’ said Martin.

They did not meet each other's eyes as they spoke ; and Dulcie, turning from her husband, went up to her own room, where, locking both doors and opening the window wide, she sat down looking out into the starry stillness of the summer night, reviewing the day's events and pondering on the difficulties of the position as it was for both her and her husband.

## CHAPTER XV.

UNOBSERVANT as is the normal preoccupied man, Martin never gave a thought to the likelihood of Dulcie's knowing of his relation with Elaine—never explained her changed conduct by this hypothesis—in fact, never thought about the subject at all. But Elaine perfectly well knew that her sister-in-law had seen and overheard that interview in the shrubbery, and that she was therefore in possession of the truth. But this conviction, which might well have daunted even an exceptionally brave woman, had no power to terrify one whose intellectual vanity and

moral callousness girded her round as with armour of triple brass. She fear Dulcie? Does the lion fear the doe? Was Mephistopheles afraid of Faust? Dulcie was but one with the rest, and the rest were either slaves or victims. Long practice in the conduct of intrigues, and hitherto absolute impunity, had imbued Elaine with the unspoken belief in her own unconquerableness. She would never be shamed by discovery and never overtaken by punishment.

She, too, reviewed her position as Dulcie reviewed hers. It was a game of chess between the two women, with living men for carven pieces, and the vindication of the right or the triumph of wrong for the stakes. And it was a game wherein Infamy was the stronger player and the more powerfully supported.

Dulcie dare not betray her. This was Elaine's strongest point of defence. To whom should she go? Mrs. Everton would not believe her, were she to confide in her; her father would believe her still less; and least of all could she influence Aston, to whom Martin would deny the whole story, preferring to brand his wife as a liar rather than betray his Love—his Leman. She herself would play her part to perfection. She would be virtuously indignant, passionately denying the truth of this base attack on her honour. Then she would be tender-hearted, forgiving, magnanimous — pleading for pardon and merciful consideration towards this poor self-deluded sister-in-law, whom jealousy and feminine spite had led so far astray. And again Martin would follow her lead, and offer Dulcie a certain show of reconciliation,

which she, the outraged wife, would reject—to her own condemnation. Here she paused, not having decided on the next move. Whatever it might be, she knew that she could count on Martin's co-operation. At her bidding he would plunge his soul into the nethermost depths—had he not done so already?—and feel repaid for eternal ruin by one smile—one kiss. Faustus to her Helen in good sooth was he! And she—'fairer than the evening air clad in the beauty of a thousand stars'—could indeed make him 'immortal with a kiss!'

Dulcie knew the shameful secret of her life—at least, one of the many hidden behind the shining veil—but her knowledge gave her no power, for she could not use it. In point of fact, it tied her hands more than it strengthened them, and made re-

ticence and self-control more necessary than before.

No ; she had nothing to fear. Her position was unassailable, and Dulcie was harmless. As friend or foe, she was worth no more than a rag fluttering on a thorn-bush ; and Elaine closed her beautiful eyes in the serene and dreamless sleep which was one of her sources of personal beauty and intellectual power, confident of ultimate victory, wherein Dulcie would have to go under. Meanwhile, her credit must be weakened at her old home, and the ground must be cut from under her feet.

‘ I think, Mummy,’ said Elaine the next morning, seating herself on a low chair near to Mrs. Everton, and laying her arm caressingly over the elder woman’s knees—‘ I think, dear, Aston and I ought to get a little house of our own, and live away from the Hall.’

‘Good gracious, child! why?’ asked Mrs. Aston, startled.

Elaine looked down as one in some secret trouble she does not wish to declare.

‘Why, my dear?’ repeated Mrs. Everton.  
‘Are you not happy here?’

‘Happy! I never was so happy in my life, darling!’ cried Elaine effusively. ‘You are like my own, very own mother, Mummy sweet! And Fa—God bless him!—is like my own father.’

‘Then why do you wish to go, my dear?’ asked the mother.

Elaine looked down again, and for a moment kept silent; then, raising her beautiful eyes with that frank look which announced the final conquest of disinclination—the final resolve to be candid, and confess the hitherto concealed thought—she said softly :

‘Because I think it makes poor Dulcie unhappy. I do not think she likes us to be here.’

‘What has put that into your head, my dear?’ cried Mrs. Everton, with genuine amazement.

‘Oh, she is so cool to me!’ said Elaine. ‘It is quite noticeable to all the world. The way in which she behaved to me yesterday—it was so painful, Mummy dear! I would rather do anything than go through the same kind of covert insult again.’

‘I don’t think Dulcie could mean to insult you, dear Elaine,’ said Mrs. Everton gravely. ‘That is not like her.’

‘I do not know what else to call it,’ returned Elaine, with sorrowful patience and grieving submission. ‘When I offered to kiss her yesterday she drew back, and everyone saw it. And I felt it bitterly.’

‘She is very undemonstrative,’ said the mother.

‘And not very good-tempered,’ said the daughter-in-law. ‘That poor Martin—Mr. Harrowby—how miserable he looks, and how little she seems to care for him!’

‘Do you think that is all Dulcie’s fault?’ asked Mrs. Everton, anxious to be just.

‘I think almost all unhappy marriages are due to the wife,’ replied Elaine in her sweetest way of feminine subjection.

And as this was the attitude which suited Mrs. Everton’s notions of proper conduct, she scored by her diplomacy, and made the heart of her mother-in-law glad within her. Aston at least had secured a wife full of nice feeling and right sentiment; and if Dulcie had become somewhat perverted, Elaine’s lovely example might perchance bring her straight.

‘I do not think Martin is unhappy with Dulcie,’ said Mrs. Everton, as if deliberating. ‘He is out of health and dull, but I have never seen my daughter neglectful or unkind.’

‘She was both yesterday,’ said Elaine impulsively—is not candour always impulsive at the first? ‘But of course I do not know,’ she added with a moderating kind of afterthought—she, too, anxious to be quite just. ‘They might have had a quarrel before they came, and poor Dulcie might have had some cause for her ill-temper. Only, of course, I think it a pity that she should betray herself so much as she did yesterday, both to her husband and to poor little me, who had done nothing to offend her. It is so ill-bred, Mummy dear—so unlike what *your* daughter should be!’

‘I must speak to her,’ said the mother gravely.

‘Do,’ said Elaine. ‘But don’t say that I have said anything. Don’t bring me into it, dear ; for though I have confided in you, just as if you were my own dear mother, I do not want to vex poor Dulcie more than she is vexed with me already.’

‘Child ! I cannot believe that she is vexed with you. Why should she be ? She has no cause,’ said Mrs. Everton.

‘None personally for anything I have said or done ; but, Mummy dear, she *is* jealous ; and she is jealous of Aston and me being here.’

‘Nonsense !’ said Mrs. Everton. ‘She has her own home. What is it to her who lives here ?’

‘Of course not, if she were reasonable ;

but jealous people never are,' said Elaine. 'And indeed, darling Mummy, for the sake of peace all round, I think that Aston and I had better leave you alone and live by ourselves. Then she cannot be cross.'

'When you are tired of the Hall, and I and my husband are no longer master and mistress—but not before,' said Mrs. Everton, somewhat stiffly.

And Elaine closed the discussion by giving her mother-in-law a tender caress, and saying softly :

'You darling! What a dear you are!'

But the poisoned arrow had struck, and Mrs. Everton was disposed to look at Dulcie's life as one all angles, with no gracious curves of womanly self-devotion, no sweetness, no lovely iridescence anywhere. If only she were more like this charming wife whom

Aston had chosen!—if only she had more sympathy and kindly consideration for others and a more complete control over herself!

‘You should try and make your husband happier, my dear,’ she said, the next time she was alone with her daughter. ‘His wretchedness is a kind of disgrace to you. Why do you not make his home brighter?’

‘I do not know what more to do than I have done or do now,’ replied Dulcie, a certain rebellious feeling rising in her as she spoke.

To be taken to task for want of consideration to Martin!—for want of endeavour to make his home happy! As if that were the spectre of her miserable marriage! It was almost more than she could bear with patience—she who knew the fatal truth of things!

‘Look at Elaine now,’ continued Mrs.

Everton injudiciously ; ‘ what sweetness of character she has ! She has an almost superhuman tact—divines in a moment what Aston likes or dislikes, and bends to his will with the sweetest complaisance you can imagine. Cannot you take example of her ?’

‘ By Elaine ? No,’ said Dulcie shortly.

‘ Why ?’ asked Mrs. Everton with dangerous calmness.

‘ Because I do not think her an ideal model,’ answered Dulcie.

‘ What fault have you to find with her, Dulcie ?’

‘ The simple one that I do not trust her,’ was the answer.

‘ I am sorry to hear you say this,’ said Mrs. Everton, still dangerously calm. ‘ I had not seen this jealous trait in your character before.’

‘Jealous! Do you think I am jealous of Elaine?’ cried Dulcie.

Her scorn made itself audible in her voice.

‘It looks like it,’ said Mrs. Everton, to whom that disdainful accent was proof and confirmation.

For what was there about this sweet daughter-in-law to scorn? Only jealousy could put on that voice when speaking of one, not only so negatively blameless but so actively delightful as Elaine. It could not be reprobation; for reprobation includes wrongdoing; and—when the stars are proved to be not fire, when the sun is shown not to move, and truth is but a liar, then, but not till then, would the fair name of Elaine be associated with wrong. Till then, Dulcie was not justified in speaking of her beautiful sister-in-law with aught but respect and

admiration ; and the scorn audible in her voice was envy, jealousy, and all uncharitableness—nought else. And these hateful vices must be scourged out of her before too late.

This scourging Mrs. Everton proposed to accomplish by that most potent agent—maternal displeasure evidenced in coldness and ungenial distance of bearing. She seldom went to Hayes Hill, and when she met her daughter elsewhere she was gravely unaffectionate, as if sorrowing in her pure soul over the lack of virtue in Dulcie. But if Elaine were present, she redoubled her attentions to this beautiful cuckoo, so craftily employed in ousting the rightful occupant from the home-nest and taking the daughter's place to herself.

In patent disgrace at her old home, tongue-tied and misunderstood, poor Dulcie ' caught

it' as schoolboys say, all round. If her parents were estranged her husband was only one degree removed from active enmity—wherein he went beyond the line set by Aston; for the husband was only sorry that his adored wife and good little sister did not hit it off better than they did, while the lover resented the discord with illimitable bitterness. Among the whole group not one remained faithful to her, or believed in her, the known and tried, so much as in this fascinating newcomer who had yet to be proved.

For indeed this quality of fascination does warp men's judgment to the most extraordinary amount of crookedness, so that treachery shall appear candour; ingratitude self-respect; a lie the mere playful humour of the moment; and the Tables of the Law, shattered at a blow, prove but the rightful self-

assertion of a strong mind and a fearless will. And this was how this same quality worked now, in favour of Elaine and to the disfavour of Dulcie.

It became recognized as a fact, regrettable enough, but still a fact four square and solid—Dulcie was jealous of her delightful sister-in-law, and made things as uncomfortable as she knew how, for one whose sole fault was her superior charm. It was a terrible revelation to find that she had this fatal flaw in her character ; but there it was, and no more was to be said. No one of course was influenced by it. Elaine's position was undisturbed ; the adoration and belief of her newly acquired family suffered no diminution ; Martin's despair, which was her triumph, marked his dissatisfaction with his wife and created for him a living hell which he often felt he must end by his own

hands ; and Dulcie was as the captive chained to the triumphal chariot wherein this beautiful impostor rode like some grand queen of old, supreme, elate, the conqueror of all her foes.

Her vanity was sated ; her love of intrigue had full play ; her self-gratulations as to the cleverness with which she could hoodwink a whole household, and throw the onus of disgrace on the only one who saw through her, were as a fountain perpetually springing up in her breast ; her marvellous capacity for acting was always in requisition ; and though she was dancing on the edge of a volcano she danced with perfect freedom and security ; for those underground fires were chained and would not burst forth.

Every now and then she met Martin alone, to keep him from absolute despair—to flatter him with the belief that she loved him and

him alone—to turn his heart still more from Dulcie—to breathe the incense of his devoted worship—to smile at his blind adoration, for all the criminal he knew her to be, and helped her to be.

This was the most risky thing she did, and she calculated chances here as nicely as in other matters. Aston did not suspect nor did his parents—no! no more than they would have suspected an angel come down from heaven or a child in arms. Besides, she took care to meet her poor dupe only when her husband had business at a distance. If Dulcie should suspect—if even she should follow and discover—what then? Her hands were held, her tongue was tied. She dared proclaim this no more than that. She might know, but she could not divulge. And even if she did, stung by that gadfly of

talk which maddens most women when laden with a secret, she would have no more following than before. Martin would deny ; the jealousy of the inferior would be her condemnation, refuting her slander ; she would lose even what she had—and she, Elaine would gain by so much. No ! she was safe ; and Martin must be kept from the last act of despair and led to make the best of his miserable life, until such time as the kaleidoscope should be shaken by the stern hand of Fate and a new combination should be made.

So things went on and the mills of God ground so slowly they seemed to be not grinding at all. Elaine was the treasure and the joy of the Hall ; Martin was like a condemned criminal living from reprieve to reprieve — wearing through the dreary intervals as best he could, buoyed up by the

prospect of that other interview ; and Dulcie, the only one enlightened, suffered even most in her heart, and lost all round.

Day by day she grew paler and thinner, more haggard, a little harder, more resolute, less expansive, more disdainful of the blind world which judged so foolishly. She made no attempt to conciliate her husband, though she was rigidly careful not to anger him. She pretended no love for him, no tenderness, but she took care that his wishes were attended to and that his physical well-being was complete. She simply kept out of his way, devoting herself to her child, and giving Martin no opportunity for repressing or repelling her. His time was his own and he might meet Elaine when and where he would—for all her interference. She knew that they did meet, and scorn for her hus-

band's blindness kept even step with her horror for his sin and contempt for his conduct. Jealous! She was too proud and too pure to be jealous of a creature like this! She was disdainful, loathing, indignant, revolted—but jealous of her faithless husband?—no more than of the blundering moth singeing its wings at the flame of a candle!

## CHAPTER XVI.

THE habit of inconstancy grows by use, and the 'lust of conquest' is as insatiable in a vain woman, devoid of principle, as any other form of moral disease. Her vanity was now beyond Elaine's power to control ; and the desire to be frantically beloved by all the men she thought worth the trouble of captivating, was emphatically stronger than herself.

Married as she was to a man who loved and trusted her as entirely as her former husband, poor Jacques, before him ; with a lover, who, through her, had made his wife one of the most miserable women on earth, as,

also through her, he was one of the most miserable men; on the crest of the local social wave; secure from detection and safely harboured after the perilous adventures she had passed through—she could not content herself with what she had and was, but, after some months—nearly a year—of this kind of life again put out on her dangerous way and once more tempted Fortune and the Furies to follow.

For the mere devilry of desire—the very madness of liking for intrigue, she stretched out her nets, not disdaining even the inferior ‘take’ which was all that Green Lanes afforded. Like all crooked-minded and sharp-witted women who have once entered on a course of intrigue, she could not be happy in an existence which was straight and simple. The excitement of danger was as

necessary to her now, as his dram to a toper—the card-table to a gamester. The pleasure of clever lying—of artfully piecing together broken bits of action so as to make a harmonious appearance—the satisfaction to her intellectual pride, found in thus hoodwinking everyone with whom she was connected—all overcame both her fear and her discretion. Not that she had much of either ; but even with the rashest of us lie certain tracts of thought and action where ‘I dare not’ waits upon ‘I would.’

To be sure she had not much choice here. Adolphus Tyson, the curate, had transferred his tepid homage from Dulcie to Ida Grantley ; and the Duke and the Earl were inaccessible. After that important presentation they had retreated into their social fastnesses, and were not to be dislodged. Besides

—they would have been too compromising had they been demonstrative ; and above all things Elaine was attentive to the religion of appearances.

The married men about the place were sober-sided citizens moderately content with the women they had taken, and not in the least disposed to run the chances of appearing as co-respondents in a divorce court ; of single men in any way eligible there were none. Or rather there was only one, and that was Percy Merritt the poet. He was not a very robust son of the Nine, but he had a certain faculty for musical verse ; and if the sense were weak and the meaning far to seek, the assonance was not contemptible and the conceits were sometimes suggestive. And at the worst a poet is a poet, and can celebrate one's beauty more

featly than any other :—which counts for something with a vain woman to whom her beauty is more than good or God, and dearer than life itself.

It was then to Percy Merritt that those insatiable eyes turned for their next victim. A man of poor means, poetical aspirations, inordinately vain as well as eminently ‘middle-class,’ he was a new experience to her—and she was minded to profit by it. Hitherto she had had wealth, brilliancy, social standing already made. To pose as the patroness of undiscovered talent—as the nurse of a new genius—the creator of a brilliant reputation—to be the Beatrice to an as yet mute and inglorious Dante—this was a new departure that pleasantly touched her ambition and smiled on the devilry in her nature.

And with this she would pose on her own

account, and be the *femme incomprise*—which indeed in one sense she was.

This character of *femme incomprise* suited Elaine to a hair. It exactly expressed those pearly tints of spiritual purity edged with intellectual iridescence, which the grosser could not discern and only the *élite* could understand. Her state of solitary spiritual supremacy gave her sweetness of submission to these rough-hewn blocks—these Philistines and ‘grocers’ among whom her lot was cast, an almost unearthly radiance. It made her beauty of soul yet more divine, and to Percy’s mind accentuated her physical loveliness till admiration touched the confines of sublimity and by very intensity became pathetic.

Indeed, there was much about Elaine, in this personation, that was pathetic, as of

some dear spirit drawn down from the heavens above, to sojourn for a while on earth. She was so tender! so refined! In her lightest moods she had nothing of the coarseness of jocularitv. Her nearest approach to mirth was a fleeting little smile that had in it more of sadness than of merriment, and that went to the heart of one as sympathetic and understanding as Percy Merritt. Even when the *ingénue*, as she sometimes was, her laughter was never loud, and her mirth was never broadly featured. Even as the *ingénue* she had traits of the *femme incomprise*, as the bud proclaims the flower. All of which, added to her personal flattery to this weak-headed young poet, completely took him captive and deprived him of such small amount of commonsense as he had started with.

‘Your poem was too sweet for words!’ she said one day, after a very second-rate little ‘ode’ had appeared in the local newspaper, of which she had been the covert inspiration. ‘That line “As the fair stars move slowly to their fall” is so lovely! It reminds me of Alfred de Musset. It had his *cachet*—his aroma.’

‘How good of you to say this!’ cried Percy, his weak face all aglow, as if he had met an angel by the way and had been fanned by celestial wings. ‘I want no higher reward than to be appreciated by you. Your approbation is my Jewel of Honour—my carcanet of deathless gems.’

‘It is very good of you to care for my appreciation,’ said Elaine modestly.

‘Oh! don’t say that!’ he cried, with the accent of one writhing in his place.

‘It is so seldom that one meets with true poetic talent,’ returned Elaine.

‘And the world is flooded with base imitations,’ said Percy, who was eaten through and through by the jealousy of the poetic nature.

‘Indeed yes!’ she answered. ‘But you have the true fire, dear friend, — and after all what is equal to that divine gift of poetry? Nothing. It is the one thing that makes life holy—that lifts us from the coarseness and commonness of earth to place us among the Loved of God in the Great Beyond above!’

‘It is the interpretation of Beauty,’ said Percy, his eyes fastened on the lovely face that had assumed for the moment an almost seraphic expression.

‘Yes, Love and Poetry and Beauty are all

interchangeable terms,' said Elaine. 'They mean—God.'

'How grand! how sublime!' said Percy ecstatically. 'That indeed is the true poetic insight!'

'Those who love God and Beauty must have it,' said Elaine, 'But how few do!'

'Ah, indeed, how few!' was the reply. 'In this place——'

'In this place,' she interrupted, speaking as one overborne by her own inner emotion to the point beyond politeness: 'in this place there is not one to understand you, dear Mr. Merritt. There is not one who has a particle of poetry in his or her soul.'

'Say not so!' said Percy a little theatrically. 'You, you—surely you are the shining bright example, the splendid exception to the rule!'

'Ah, but I am an outsider and an alien,'

she returned. 'I do not count. Of course *I* understand you. But then, I have had a different education from anyone here. I have seen more, read more, felt more—and suffered more.'

Here her lovely eyes were suffused with that cloud of moisture which is more pathetic than tears.

'You cannot find congenial companions here,' said Percy with a distinct and clear self-exception.

'Alas no !' she replied. 'My dear husband is the honestest man in the world—his parents are kind and good—my sister-in-law is good too, in her own hard, *tant soit peu* brutal way ; but she is a person without soul or sensibilities,' she added parenthetically. 'But for all their *bourgeois* goodness, to call them companions for my Soul—intellectual sympa-

thizers—spiritual comrades—oh no ! no ! no !  
I am alone, quite alone in life—alone with  
my disappointments, my disillusionments !

‘ I can feel for you,’ said Percy with a  
choking sensation in his throat that strangled  
his words.

‘ Ah ! the aspirations—the dreams of one’s  
early youth !’ she said, always in the same  
mournful tone of sorrowful retrospection. ‘ I  
have learnt strength, dear friend, in renouncing  
the hope of spiritual companionship, and that  
sublime and more ineffable happiness which  
comes from the communion of soul with soul.  
I am alone, and alone I must take my  
spiritual path. The brightest rays of light I  
have is when by chance I meet a kindred  
soul who has gone through the same experi-  
ence with myself, and who can understand  
the agony of that barren waste.’

‘As I,’ said Percy. ‘I have lived through it.’

‘Naturally!’ she said. ‘In Green Lanes you cannot have found a fitting companion.’

‘Not till now,’ he said.

‘Nor one to understand and sympathize.’

‘Not till now,’ he repeated.

She smiled. It was the smile of a superior—a something, half-mother, half-saint—a creature of grander worth and purer flame, yet human and living at the same time;—still—superior, always superior, and compounded of more sublime elements than he.

‘Yes,’ she said sweetly and slowly. ‘I think I can understand you.’

‘And I you,’ was his eager response.

‘Yes?’

Into this little word she put a whole world of meaning. It was as if touched with weariness—with incredulity, as of one who

had been so often deceived as now to have lost the spring of faith in pleasant promise.

‘Surely ! Do we not meet on the Heights ?’ he replied.

She held out her hand.

‘It is good to meet a kindred soul,’ she said.

And Percy Merritt felt that for this glorious creature of unappreciated powers—this lonely soul burning with hidden fire and tremulous with archangelic emotions—for this supreme emanation of the Divine Spirit of the Universe he would die—if he might not live. All the poetry, mute or eloquent, that his portion of the human soul possesses, flowed out to this gracious and most exquisite confidante. He was now like some sworn Knight vowed to his Ladye’s service—now like some devotee consecrated to his fair saint’s worship. If he could

but do something for her welfare and his own renown ! If he could but emulate some grand Knight of olden time and write her name by his deeds of prowess as his Lady on the page of history !—or be a second Shakespeare and create some century of sonnets to her honour and his own glory !—if he could but fitly express his adoration and receive some token of recognition for reward ! His brain, never strong, seemed to reel under the pressure of these radiant but chaotic thoughts ; and that he did not make a declared fool of himself at that moment was due, not to his own self-command but to the prosaic fact of Dulcie's entrance—Dulcie, once the object of his poetic musings ; and now—beside Elaine—compared with Elaine—she was as a farthing rushlight compared with the Evening Star of Heaven !

Her sudden entrance was as a cold douche to all this fervid feeling ; but it was also too sudden for Percy's self-possession. Elaine recovered herself in an instant—one form of histrionic pretence being as easy as another ;—and she was experienced in the art of instantaneous recovery. With Percy the thing had been real and earnest, and it is difficult to change in the twinkling of an eye from the passion of romance and perfervid love to the smooth indifferentism of conventional good-breeding. It takes some practice before the art is acquired. And a virtuous young poet in a respectable country society has had none. Wherefore he betrayed himself as plainly as if he had spoken ; and Dulcie saw that something undesirable was between these two.

Elaine knew that she must see and note

the embarrassment and disorder of this poor manikin whom she was making dance ; and, quick as a flash, she devised the screen under cover of which she thought to withdraw for her own account, and darken Dulcie's vision for his.

‘ Mr. Merritt has just been confiding to me the plan of a grand poem he is meditating,’ she said, with her sweetest frankest smile. ‘ I predict for him a splendid success and immortal fame. If it moves the world as much as it has moved me and him—it will be indeed immortal !’

She made as if to put her arms round her sister-in-law as she said this ; but honest Dulcie was not of the stuff that caresses or receives caresses from secret enemies and treacherous friends. Instead of accepting or responding to Elaine's proffered grace she drew herself up rigidly, two bright red spots

that flushed with sudden fire in her cheeks and a certain flash in her eyes alone betraying the passion within.

‘Where is my mother?’ she asked abruptly.

‘She and your brother—’ ‘—God bless her! she does not call that clod her “husband” before me,’ thought Percy, ‘—have gone out,’ replied Elaine with an almost exaggerated gentleness of demeanour, as though she had said: ‘See what an angel of sweetness I am to this Tartar!’

This was how Percy took that little by-play; and his love for the one rose into an almost tragic passion of intensity, while his nascent distaste for the other blazed out into absolute hatred. It was but an instance of how the world judges by appearances, and how the crafty are able to mistranslate the unconscious and sincere.

‘When will they be back?’ asked Dulcie, still in the same abrupt way, her darkened eyes fixed on the beautiful snake before her as one looks at a thing one loathes, and yet does not ignore in view of that probable attack.

‘Now, how should I know, dear!’ said Elaine with an aggrieved intonation. ‘I am not with them and cannot possibly tell where they are or what they are doing. You see, dear, I am not a jealous wife and do not play spy on my husband,’ she added with the *ingénue’s* simplicity.

‘It would be odd if you did,’ said Dulcie. ‘You have no cause.’

‘And if I had cause I should not,’ said Elaine prettily.

‘I know no one who would more certainly than you,’ said Dulcie with unconcealed disdain.

‘Why do you say that, dear?’ said Elaine, always with exaggerated sweetness.

‘Because you love power,’ said Dulcie. ‘And if Aston gave himself away like that you would make him remember it.’

Elaine exchanged looks with Percy.

‘Did I not tell you?’ said her eyes. ‘Is she not a brute?’

‘Yes; and I love you,’ said Percy in return.

‘Will you tell my mother I called to see her and wanted to speak to her?’ said Dulcie.

‘Shall I say what about?’ Elaine answered.

‘No, I want to tell her myself,’ was the return—a reply made with a little malice, for the thing was nothing more important than a letter from town with sundry dress-patterns, which Mrs. Everton wanted to see. But she left the communication purposely obscure that Elaine might have the enjoyment of a

moment's fear and doubt. For after all, clever dancer as one may be, the edge of a volcano is dangerous ground, and there is never any certainty that the crust of lava may not give way, to the imminent peril of the performer. And though Elaine felt tolerably safe even with Dulcie, and though she despised the brains of the Evertons *en masse*, and looked on them as dummies compared with herself, still—even fools have the trick of supremacy at times ; and it does not take a genius to hide a stone in the sleeve ready for launching when the most appropriate moment comes.

‘I told you,’ she said to Percy when Dulcie had taken her cold and somewhat hurried departure. ‘I told you what a temper she had and how hard and cruel she is to me.’

‘But why?’ asked Percy, his eyes moist to

match those of the lovely siren before him. 'What can induce her to behave so brutally to such a divine person as yourself?'

'Jealousy,' said Elaine with a sad little smile—as sad as that on the Cenci's parted lips. 'She hates to see me liked, and feels that I am an interloper and have taken her place.'

'Her place!' cried Percy with scorn. 'As if the place which you fill she could ever have taken! She is commonplace, vulgar, hard, unlovely; and you—you, the queen of womanhood!—its fragrant flower and most enthralling essence!'

'You are too good,' said Elaine. 'But now go, dear friend. I would not care for Mrs. Everton to find you here. Dulcie is capable of any amount of mischief-making, and she may create something out of this pure, this holy friendship—this exquisite union of souls.'

‘ If she did, I would kill her ! ’ cried Percy.

He was a poet and in love, hence selfish and intractable. He lingered, loath to leave, till Elaine’s power of politic self-suppression almost failed her.

‘ This idiot ! he will spoil all ! ’ she thought impatiently ; and while her provincial Apollo repeated again and again his professions of love and devotion, quivering with emotion self-betrayed to the dullest eye, she listened on thorns for the carriage which was to bring her husband and his mother.

‘ What a ridiculous bore ! ’ she thought, when at last she had got rid of him. ‘ On the whole, is the game worth the candle—with such a foolish person as this ? Have I done unwisely ? If so, I must be bold and circumspect in time, and cut short the affair before it becomes compromising.’

## CHAPTER XVII.

THE most dangerous person with whom a woman can be associated in an intrigue of any kind is a man who, with strong passions, absolute sincerity and independent views, is not what we are all agreed to call a 'gentleman.' As he has never graduated in the school of conventional propriety, he refuses to be influenced by social considerations. As he has never 'passed' in the science of conventional honour, he ignores the fine distinctions made by gentlemen between the actions of men and those of women—between the necessities of the social law and those of elemental

humanity—but lumps them all in one basket, and calls the amalgam the New Morality. He reduces all things to their rudiments; prefers the rights of the individual to the well-being of the community; gives a high-sounding name to the selfishness of love; and eases his heart by blaspheming the world as the concoction of villainy and oppression.

Such a man, unaccustomed to the artificial restraints imposed by good-breeding, is sure to break loose when his passions are roused; and a woman who can guide with a look the more highly-trained and the better-bred, is as powerless to control one of this sort as though he were a wild ass of the desert, ridden bare-backed and with a snaffle.

All this was disastrously true at this moment with Percy Merritt in his relations with Elaine. She had played her part of *femme incomprise*

too well, and had posed too effectually as the sweet spirit in bondage to the grosser forces. She had roused up in him all his sense of manliness, such as it was, and filled him with the desire to rescue and release this lovely exile from heaven imprisoned by the coarse gnomes of earth—*i.e.*, the Evertons. And she had made him believe that he—he alone—could give the spiritual sympathy without which she was as a flower withering on its stalk, wanting the dear sun and the warm south wind.

What was that miserable abstraction, the World, compared with Love? Respectability was a mere scarecrow set up to fright the Birds of Paradise from the golden grain, which was their inheritance. Truth and Reality, and a man's power to live his own life, were things in themselves; but the World

was a mere cloud, a vapour, a congeries of dissoluble and most contemptible atoms, and counted for nothing in the sum.

A nine days' wonder, and then the talk would cease ; but the joy would remain, and that deliverance from bondage would be completed.

Such thoughts as these possessed him. They filled that poor, weak thing he called his mind, and banished reason and all perception of righteousness as completely as if he had been in the throes of a fever-dream. He saw nothing but this divine woman's pathetic submission to her evil fate—knew nothing but his own mad desire to free her from her thralldom ; believing in her love for him, and his ability to make her life blessed, as sincerely as he believed in his own proper existence.

Night and day his thoughts ran on this,

till the misery of Elaine's oppression, and his own desire to comfort her, threatened to overwhelm him. And night and day he caused Elaine to have fever-fits of self-reproach, as well as of fear, for her folly in descending to this low level—putting herself so far in the power of one who was emphatically 'not a gentleman, *pur sang*.'

She could do nothing with him. Blinded by love and untaught by the world, he took everything the wrong way. When she, making for prudence, doubled back on her own words and sought to show that, after all, she was not so very badly off, and that really her dear, good, clumsy husband was very kind to her, and his parents were friendly, Percy merely adored her the more enthusiastically for her sweetness, but believed in her pious fraud not one whit.

‘I understand you,’ he one day said, squirming in adoration. ‘Your goodness is more than sublime, but I am not to be deceived, even by that heavenly radiance!’

‘I may be morbid,’ said Elaine with gentle penitence. ‘Sometimes I think I am, and then I imagine things that do not exist, and exaggerate those that do.’

‘How like you to excuse others by accusing yourself!’ said Percy. ‘But I cannot let this great self-wrong pass uncontradicted. Have I not myself seen and heard Mrs. Harrowby’s vulgar insolence? Do I want other proof?’

‘Oh, Dulcie!—yes, Dulcie hates me, and takes every opportunity of showing it,’ said Elaine quickly.

Even fear of this madman’s precipitancy, and dread of what he might do to save her if she did not control him, faded before the

stronger light of her enmity for Dulcie, this inferior woman in whom her own dismissed lover had been able to find a temporary and tepid comfort.

‘And if she dares to be thus brutal, what must be the others?’ said Percy. ‘No one to protect you from their coarse handling—no one to shield this Great Gift they have received at the hands of a God they are too crass to understand!’

‘They mean kindly,’ said Elaine, trying to hedge.

‘Which does not make matters better for you,’ returned Percy, sticking to his text and refusing to see the signal.

‘Ah, dear friend, life is so full of difficulties! It is just one great compromise throughout,’ philosophized Elaine in her most seraphic manner.

‘And it is just such exquisite emanations from the Divine as yourself who have to be protected from these evil chances—these difficulties—these compromises,’ said Percy, adoring the sweet saint before him.

‘You exalt me beyond my deserts,’ said Elaine, with a faint suspicion of temper in her voice.

Adoration is all very well when it means incense carried to the shrine within the temple—sweet to the nostrils, and safe to receive; but adoration that may set you in the pillory—incense that may burn itself out into cabbage-stalks and dead cats—each is a nuisance, and to be damped down into prosaic consideration by all the means in one’s power.

‘That is impossible,’ cried Percy, folding his hands in a mediæval kind of attitude, and

knotting his thin legs into an ungraceful coil somehow suggestive of rheumatic snakes.

‘Your praises are sweet, dear friend,’ returned Elaine; ‘but you must be discreet. If you show too much sympathy with me you will do me more harm than good, and my fate will be rendered all the harder.’

‘It is because it is so hard that I want to rescue you from it,’ said Percy, unmasking his batteries.

‘That is an impossibility,’ said Elaine firmly.

‘How? Why?’ he said.

‘How can a wife be rescued?’ she asked with the air of one who has never heard of the Divorce Court and could not compass the very idea of a breach of the Seventh Commandment.

She looked so pure, so lofty in her angelic

innocence that Percy fell back, for the moment abashed. And yet—was not his love holier than her marriage? What was the mere legal tie of wedlock when the essential meaning was something so terrible as this of hers? Was not he, Percy, consecrated to be her deliverer and second self by spiritual sympathy—by her own act of confidential friendship—by his love for her and hers for him? Who else ought to have the guardianship of her life but the one who understood the value of the gift placed in his hands, and who would fulfil its sublime obligations?

She had not said in so many words that she loved him, nor he that he loved her. But it was a thing patent and understood between them, and the transparent veil of silence in which they had hitherto covered this love,

made it only the more lovely—the more precious. She knew that she was as his very life-blood to him ; and he thought he knew that underneath all her noble self-control—her gentle distrust of a new departure which involved the social well-being of another—he knew, or thought he knew, poor fool ! that he was to her as that Second Self which wandering souls go seeking through life—and sometimes never find. But she—she had found hers ; and that other half was himself !

For a moment abashed—owing to the wretched influence of false principles taught in early life by that immoral thing we call morality—the next, he went back to his place of Folly.

‘ The spirit is the life,’ he said. ‘ The letter is hard—and killeth.’

‘ The letter must be kept if we are to live

in the world at all,' she answered with some coldness and some acerbity—very faint, very slight, felt as an influence rather than seen as a presence.

'Between you and me, my Beautiful Lady, that is unnecessary,' was his response.

'Between me and my own conscience, it is arbitrary,' she said.

'We have discussed that before, sweet saint,' he returned. 'How often have we agreed that the whole meaning of vice and virtue resides in the spirit, not the deed!'

'Just so, as before God. With man and his social obligations it is different.'

'Are these to be placed before intrinsic truth?' he asked in a shocked and grieving voice. 'The husk before the core? The external appearance before the internal value?'

The World before Truth and Love? Man before God?’

‘We must do the best with things as we have them,’ said Elaine.

‘Oh say not so! say not so, I implore you, sweet saint!’ cried Percy, holding up his clasped hands appealingly. ‘You whom I have regarded as the pure priestess of the Grand Religion of Truth—speak not of compromise between your soul and the world!’

‘We cannot live as we would,’ began Elaine.

With the word the door opened and Mrs. Everton came in from the garden, where she had been secretly planning with the gardener how to convert the flower-beds on the lawn, which had been made according to Dulcie’s design in the year when she was her mother’s right hand and delight, into a quite different

pattern and arrangement to suit the taste of the new queen regnant—that golden-crested cuckoo who had thrust the rightful occupant so far from the centre of the maternal heart.

‘In what way would you live differently from what you do, my dear?’ asked Aston’s mother, smiling.

She had overheard this enigmatical little speech as she entered the room; but, though keen-witted enough, she was not of the basely suspicious kind, and it did not occur to her imagination as possible to give a personal meaning to these words. She made her smiling query from the very opposite feeling—making it fun by pretending to think it personal. For it was too monstrous to suppose that Elaine could wish for aught she had not here at the Hall!—that she could

desire so much as the addition of a straw—the subtraction of a feather—in her radiant life of love and sufficiency !

‘ In no way, dearest Mummy,’ answered Elaine. ‘ It was only a mere abstract expression of how delightful it would be to fly like the birds and live on flowers and perfumes like the bees and the butterflies !’

‘ That is nonsense, my dear,’ said Mrs. Everton, with ominous gravity and maddening literalness. ‘ In the first place it is flying in the face of Providence who has not seen fit to give us wings, and who has made it necessary for us to live on bread and meat : and in the next, bees and butterflies don’t live on flower-scents but on the honey that they find in the tubes of certain flowers. I thought every child knew that !’

‘ But Mrs. Aston’s fancy was sublime, and

the plain prose of life needs to be over-exalted,' said Percy.

Mrs. Everton turned her calm eyes with astonishment on this self-constituted champion.

'Nonsense is never sublime,' she said stolidly. 'And discontent with our mortal lot, as divine Wisdom has arranged it for us, is an iniquity, to say the least of it.'

'That is rather a harsh judgment,' said Percy hastily.

At one time he would as soon have thought of contradicting the Rector in the pulpit as of dissenting from Mrs. Everton. But love was stronger than social subservience, and as Elaine's self-constituted champion he must justify his existence.

Mrs. Everton looked at him up and down, as if she had never seen him before. Elaine

wished she could have struck him dead with one glance of her eye.

‘My mother is never harsh,’ she said, taking Mrs. Everton’s hand, which she kissed.

‘And if I were, pray what business is that of yours?’ said Mrs. Everton severely.

‘I would not like to see her hardly treated,’ flashed out Percy, hot and cold by turns, but resolved to stand by his persecuted saint, though for her sake he should undergo martyrdom.

‘What is the meaning of all this?’ cried Mrs. Everton in bewilderment. ‘You, Percy Merritt, dare to speak to me in my own house of my daughter-in-law as “hardly treated”? You dare to couple her name in the very remotest degree with the idea of harsh treatment from us? How dare you, sir, I say! How dare you!’

‘Indeed, Mr. Merritt, you have gone beyond your tether,’ interposed Elaine with grave displeasure.

‘We are not all qualified for the understanding possession of a priceless treasure,’ said Percy.

‘I consider your speech a freedom and an impertinence,’ said Mrs. Everton. ‘Elaine, my dear, why do you not check this most presumptuous young man? His behaviour is as insolent as it is inexplicable.’

‘I cannot understand it, Mummy, any more than you,’ said Elaine in her sweetest way, with a meaning glance at Percy. Mrs. Everton’s eyes were also turned on him, and therefore she was off-guard so far as her daughter-in-law was concerned. ‘I think he must have taken some strangely wrong ideas somehow, for indeed I do not know what he means!’

Percy returned her meaning glance with one full of amazement, reproach, and love combined.

‘I mean only——’ he began.

‘You mean nothing at all,’ said Elaine. ‘You are making a great and unpardonable blunder, and are talking in the air.’

‘But you yourself——’ he broke in.

‘You had better leave now at once before you have committed yourself further,’ interrupted Elaine. ‘You are insupportable with your fancies and mistakes!’

She spoke with unbridled displeasure, and her foolish lover was for the moment struck dumb. If anyone wanted enlightenment it was he, not they. It was as if the solid earth had reeled beneath his feet, and he could not understand the changed condition of things.

‘You have no right to mean anything at

all,' put in Mrs. Everton. 'I think you have taken leave of your senses altogether, Mr. Merritt, and I hope I shall never have a renewal of this scene. I must beg you to leave the house now at once; else,' said the lady, with all the dignity of her kind, 'I shall be obliged to resort to strong measures, and have you removed.'

'I will withdraw only at Mrs. Aston's bidding,' said Percy, still in the fog. 'She is the Sovereign Lady whom I obey—she and none other!'

'For Heaven's sake go and don't be such a fool!' said Elaine, in her genuine anger quite forgetting her *rôle* of saint and seraph. 'You are too ridiculous, Mr. Merritt, for words! Go!' she said again, contemptuously turning her back on him while she took Mrs. Everton's hand caressingly between both her own.

‘I obey,’ said Percy. ‘But remember,’ he added with emphasis: ‘remember I am within call and at your orders whenever I am wanted or can be of use to you. You have but to command and I will obey—yea! at the cost of my life, sweet saint!’

‘You fool!’ cried Elaine as her parting shot; and the fog deepened over Percy’s bewildered mind.

‘In the name of fortune what does all this mean?’ cried Mrs. Everton when Percy had conveyed himself out of the room. ‘It all seems to me like some grotesque farce or dream—as if I were mad, or you and he were! What have you been saying or doing, Elaine, to this wretched mountebank to justify such an extraordinary outbreak?’

‘It is as great a mystery to me as to you, Mummy,’ said Elaine, shrugging her

shoulders. 'He must have been drinking, or else he is a little mad.'

'I never heard of Percy Merritt's drinking,' said Mrs. Everton very gravely. 'He used to be a Blue Ribbonite and spout on platforms. But of course he may have changed—I know nothing about that—or as you say, perhaps he has become queer. He never had too much sense, and the little he ever had has evidently gone by now.'

'Evidently,' said Elaine with transparent simplicity of accord. 'He is the most ridiculous person I have ever seen,' she added, acting amazement and contempt, dashed with indifference, to the life.

But Mrs. Everton was not quite satisfied. She was one of those shrewd yet innocent women who see more than they understand, and who are not always easy to dupe, though

their suspicions are often vague and they shrink from the logical conclusions of their own thoughts. And there was something in this queer matter that roused her suspicion, though as yet it was unfocussed, and she could not have said in so many words to what it pointed.

She was, however, sufficiently uneasy to carry her perplexities to Dulcie, with whom she had not been specially confidential of late. Elaine had, as we know, put out her strength to separate the mother from the daughter, and had in great part succeeded. But the average woman must have a sympathetic ear into which to pour her confidences. She cannot keep them under the lock and key of silence. And whose ear so handy to a mother as her daughter's?—especially when the subject to be dilated on is the odd behaviour of a

daughter-in-law? For though Elaine in her character of magic woman—an enchantress of old time translated into modern form—had come and seen and conquered, and been adopted into her husband's home as if she had been a fairy-gift to the family—still, that was only while the days were fair and the sky was serene. Given the clouds of discontent or suspicion—the mother would revert to her own, and the son's wife would be set in the place usually assigned to her in the old home.

As now, when oppressed by a certain vague disquiet and nameless dread, Mrs. Everton betook herself to Dulcie, to talk over Percy Merritt's extraordinary conduct and take her daughter's counsel and opinion thereon.

It was not often that Mrs. Everton had found herself 'bested' by circumstances, but

this time she was forced to own to it, and confess herself lost as in a wood and entangled in a coil, unable to find her way through the one or to extricate herself from the other. It was all so extraordinary—and though Elaine had professed so much surprise—can there be smoke without fire? And if there had been any fire of her complaining, to account for the smoke of his insulting championship and injurious suggestions—then was she of all women the basest, the most treacherous, the most unworthy.

But Mrs. Everton could not and would not believe this without further proof. The sweet and gracious creature whom they had taken to their hearts in such pure adoption of love—for her to prove a black-hearted traitor, a snake, a bosom foe—no! it was impossible. Or if not quite impossible, it was something

so dreadful as to be fought off to the last moment and accepted only when further denial was impossible.

Yet and yet—Tossed between dread and trust—doubt and hope—the dear lady drove off to Hayes Hill, feeling that a certain peace and security waited for her there, as when one, who has been caught in a squall during a summer day's sail, comes safely back to land in the well-known old spot.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

DOES the woman live who is absolutely free from all spice of devilry?—who has not a trace of malice? If so, let her ascend the scented pyre of the phœnix and emerge with him from the ashes—let her comb her yellow locks with a golden comb, singing sweet songs and basking in the sunshine with the mermaids on the rocks. For she verifies fable and makes the impossible a living fact.

Good, honest, noble-hearted as Dulcie was, she yet had her spice of devilry and her dash of malice with the rest. When her

mother opened her budget and poured out the burden of her perplexities Dulcie felt a big throb of satisfaction. The situation was grave and the whole thing full of danger and entanglement. Still, she could not, and indeed did not care to, repress this throb of satisfaction at the unmasking, so far as it went, of the cheat who had been and was the worst enemy she had ever known, and who had done her such irreparable injury.

‘I do not know what to think!’ continued Mrs. Everton, when she had related the whole circumstance and repeated every word as accurately as if she had been a phonograph. ‘I do not like to imagine Elaine guilty of imprudence; and I do not see how, even if she were, she could have given Percy Merritt such a false impression of her life. That he—the creature he is—should dare to talk of

“protecting” her against Us! It is monstrous!

Dulcie pondered. What should she do? Trust her mother with her own secret, and so run the risk of maternal horror overwhelming family policy, and the outraged feelings of the British matron becoming too strong for the prudence of reticence? Or should she salve over the whole thing, indulging herself with slight indications—telling little digs here and there—just sufficient to put her mother on her guard, and satisfy that trace of malice, which, being a mortal woman, was the dark-coloured thread traversing the whiter texture of her soul? This she thought would be her better way. Compromise is, after all, a wiser thing than the extremer measure; and to burn one's boats behind one is scarce so politic as to have a

sailing-vessel, fully rigged and equipped, ready to put out to sea if the land gets too hot to hold one.

But Elaine should 'have it,' so far as she dare give it!

'I dare say she has been imprudent,' said Dulcie, after a pause. 'She has been so long accustomed to foreign life that, although she is an Englishwoman—at least she says she is,' she added with a certain scornful accent in her qualifying doubt—'she has lost the real English touch and is far more foreign than English. She may have said things to Percy Merritt—things like "not being understood" and all that rubbish, which he has taken seriously—he is such a donkey!—and made more of them than she intended he should.'

'But she *is* understood,' protested dear literal Mrs. Everton.

‘She may like to imagine that she is not,’ answered Dulcie. ‘She poses for being so very superior, you know. And as we have not been to the same places nor known the same people that she has, she may call this “mental isolation” and all those fine phrases I myself have heard her use—and misuse.’

‘That would not explain things,’ said Mrs. Everton. ‘Why should she pity herself because we have never been to Russia or Constantinople? That is nonsense, Dulcie.’

‘I do not think so, mother. She is vain and loves not only admiration—that is not surprising—but special consideration, however got.’

This was a step forward.

‘And would condescend to misrepresent us for the sake of Percy Merritt’s special consideration?’ asked Mrs. Everton.

‘His or any other man’s,’ answered Dulcie firmly.

‘My dear, let me understand. Do you mean to say that Elaine, Aston’s wife, could forget herself so far as to make a confidant of this very commonplace young man?—that she would lie—for that is the plain English of it—to get sympathy from him for not being understood by your father and me and Aston?’

Mrs. Everton fixed her eyes on her daughter with a curiously anxious expression. Was Dulcie quite sane or was Elaine absolutely bad?

‘I think she would do that kind of thing for any man in the world,’ said Dulcie.

‘Oh, that is rank prejudice!’ said her mother somewhat too severely. ‘You have never taken to her, Dulcie, and you have

let your prejudice run away with your judgment.'

'If you say these things, mother, I shall say no more. There is no use in my speaking if I am to be rebuked for prejudice and want of truth.'

Dulcie spoke with sudden exasperation. Knowing what she did, and seeing so much farther and more clearly than her mother into the muddy depths of this affair, she was not unnaturally indignant at the accusation of prejudice and injustice made at the very moment when she was screening this wretched sinner against the worst consequences of her actions.

Mrs. Everton put on her gravest face. She was a stickler for the etiquette of degrees, and could ill brook a flash of spirit from her daughter—always her 'child' and never quite

grown up, though married and a mother herself.

‘You forget yourself, Dulcie,’ she said icily.

‘Well, mother, if I did, I am sorry and apologize,’ said Dulcie tenderly. ‘But indeed it is maddening to hear this cuckoo-cry that I am prejudiced against this new woman—jealous of her, and all that nonsense—and that therefore my opinion goes for nothing. It is too much, when I think of everything!’ she added incautiously.

‘What do you think of?—and what is everything?’ asked her mother suspiciously. The stone set a-rolling was going down hill.

‘Oh, everything,’ replied Dulcie with large generosity of potentialities. ‘At all events, mother, let it be distinctly understood—I am not jealous of Elaine. I was quite as much

disposed to like her as any of you were ; and I should have liked her as much if I had believed in her as you do. But I do *not* believe in her.'

'Do you *know* anything against her ?' asked Mrs. Everton in the tone and with the manner of the upright judge ready to pronounce according to evidence.

'I know enough to think her neither a good woman nor a sincere one. So, mother, I advise you to be a little on your guard and not to give yourself away as much as you have done.'

Dulcie spoke deliberately and as one having authority.

'You must tell me what you know,' said her mother gravely.

'No, dear, I will not,' replied the daughter firmly. 'You must have a little trust in

me. You used to have—so you must now again.'

'Yet if you know anything against my son's wife, I as the mother ought to be told,' urged Mrs. Everton.

'No, mother, I cannot and will not tell you what I know,' repeated Dulcie. 'You must trust me, as I said before. There *is* something against Elaine, and she is both treacherous and dangerous. My own distinct belief is—but this I do not know—she was nothing more nor less than an adventuress when Aston married her.'

'Dulcie!' cried Mrs. Everton, aghast. 'You do not know what you are saying! An adventuress!—Aston married to an adventuress! The woman we have taken to our hearts like a daughter, an adventuress!'

'That is my firm conviction—which is not

knowledge,' answered Dulcie. 'That she is false, wicked, abominable, *is* of my own knowledge!'

The torch was blazing and those boats were very near the flame!

'I do not like to believe without proof,' said Mrs. Everton, on whom her daughter's directness was gaining and who did, also, like many good women, enjoy a little intimate gossip.

'You have already believed without proof,' said Dulcie, looking her mother full in the face; 'and you have let her influence you in more ways than one:—as I know to my cost,' she added with meaning.

'Who would not!' said Mrs. Everton a little apologetically. 'She is the most charming person to live with you can imagine. She gains all hearts and all trust.'

‘She never gained mine,’ said Dulcie.

‘You never lived with her,’ returned her mother.

‘If I had I should have found her out all the sooner,’ was the reply. ‘But we need not dispute about that, mother! All I want to impress on you is—Elaine is not to be trusted. She is treacherous and false from head to heel, and you must be on your guard against her.’

‘It is a very uncomfortable state of things and I ought to know,’ said Mrs. Everton discontentedly.

‘It would only make everything worse if you did,’ replied Dulcie dryly.

Mrs. Everton called to her aid her old power of self-suppression and quiescent acceptance of the inevitable. Her Quaker blood reasserted itself as she folded her hands

in her lap, and then Dulcie knew that she had surrendered and subscribed the articles. She knew too, that although there would be no marked change in manner to Elaine, she, the mother, would henceforth be on her guard, and no longer allow this influence, which was so sweet yet so pernicious, to warp her as it had done.

When Mrs. Everton left she kissed her daughter more affectionately than she had done for all these long unhappy months of silent estrangement. It was as if a fog had dispersed—as if she had crossed over from the other side of a dividing river and had come back to her own ; and Dulcie's strained eyes grew moist and tender, knowing that her mother's heart had returned to her as of old.

Then Mrs. Everton drove home, and as she went along the road which skirted the

wood, she saw, wandering dolefully beneath the overhanging trees, the cause of this late outbreak—that miserable Percy Merritt, looking as wretched and forlorn as if he had been the oppressed of all nature and the outcast of all humanity.

As indeed he felt. He had offended Her, his Goddess, and she had discarded and disowned him. What should he do? Where go? What had he to hold by in life?

Mingled with his despair came gusts of anger against Elaine—gusts of that hate which is but the other side of love. Like flashes of forked lightning rending the thunder cloud came sudden sensations of the fierce joy he would have in strangling her with his own hands. Now she seemed to soar above him in his old fond fancy of spiritual splendour incarnate, and now she seemed the embodi-

ment of all that womanhood has of falsest and basest. Mélusine, Lilith, Vivien—she was one of the same brood—half woman, half serpent, and more devil than either.

His mind was almost unhinged. Between love and doubt, despair and desire, he scarce knew where he was, nor what was true and what a phantasy of his own sick brain. What he did know however, was—he was wrecked as completely as any poor sailor, the sport of the wind and waves, cast upon some barren rock where was neither rest nor shelter.

Beggared of hope and happiness, he walked with the shambling gait of a beggar. All manly self-respect seemed to have left him; and before she passed him and saw his face, Mrs. Everton did not recognize him. He gave her the impression of rags and mendicancy.

When she reached home, she found her son and daughter in the drawing-room. The loveliness of the picture they made ! Elaine was half-reclining on the sofa, in the attitude which best expressed the exquisite lines of her figure, and made her whole person like some sweet poem translated into form from words. He, as befitted his normal attitude of manly love bowed down to adoration, was on a lower seat, so that her arm could rest on his shoulder, while his face, lifted to hers, intoned a voiceless hymn of praise. Ineffably sweet and femininely languid, her eyes embraced him in that wonderful way in which she was able to convey the sense of love sublimated and purified by the spirit.

She looked so gracious, so pure, so beyond and above all other women, that Mrs. Everton stopped for a full minute at the door, her

mind as chaotic as poor Percy Merritt's, not knowing what to believe, nor whom to trust. She knew Dulcie, her truth and honesty, her single-heartedness, her trustworthiness ; but might she not have been deceived ? Her qualities went to the good of her own soul ; but did they guarantee the clear-sightedness of her intellect ? Could that gracious creature be the living falsehood Dulcie had represented ? It seemed scarce possible.

Bewildered and shaken, Mrs. Everton came forward into the room, and drew near to the loving pair. As she came up to them, she read the difference between their start of surprise. Aston, whose back was turned towards her, had not seen nor known of her entrance. Elaine, who fronted her, had. But both started as if in surprise ; and the one was genuine, and the other was not.

It was but a little thing by which to confirm or deny, but that old proverb about straws and the wind holds good in life, and shows the course of events and the channel of character. If Elaine could be guilty of even this little act of pretence, quite without value or meaning as it was, she might be guilty of larger treacheries ; for indeed, there are but few barriers on the road which leads downward. Falsehood in a small matter very soon begets falsehood in a larger ; and treachery which drowns you in the deepest part of the Serbonian bog, has also the faculty of skimming over the thinnest ice there is.

The grave and gentle face became a trifle graver than usual, and a trifle sterner. The light of love which had been in it for Elaine, ever since her adoption into the family, faded as if a cloud had passed over the moon.

More things die within us than that congeries of forces we call life ; and Love carries his funeral in our eyes, even as once he marked the moment when he leaped forth from the heart, radiant, strong, and grandly living.

Elaine read the mute message of doubt, of death ; but it was not in her part to acknowledge all she understood.

‘ Dear Mummy ! you came in like a beautiful spirit, as you are ! ’ she said caressingly, rising from the sofa and advancing to meet her mother-in-law.

‘ Well, mater, where have you come from ? ’ was Aston’s more prosaic greeting.

‘ I have been to see your sister,’ said Mrs. Everton, speaking to her son, but not to Elaine.

‘ I hope, dear girl, she was all right,’ said Elaine tenderly.

‘Yes, she was well, thank you,’ said Mrs. Everton, who somehow scented pretence in the gentle voice and caressing word.

‘She has been looking ill of late,’ returned Elaine. ‘She sometimes looks so worried and anxious—almost haggard indeed’

‘I do not see it,’ said Mrs. Everton.

‘You are such a sympathetic Sweet, you are always fancying folks are ill,’ laughed Aston, his arm round his wife’s supple waist. ‘If I did not take care, you would make a molly-coddle of even me.’

‘You see, love has its drawbacks,’ said Elaine caressingly.

‘Not love of the right sort,’ said Mrs. Everton, shooting an arrow a little wide of any mark in view. For if married love is not of the right sort, what is?

‘Well! I cannot see any in *this* love,’ re-

turned Aston, indicating his wife by kissing her hand ; and his mother wished he had not.

A strange atmosphere seemed to have suddenly surrounded Elaine, and she felt as if she were looking at this beautiful daughter-in-law, who erstwhile had been so clearly outlined and so exquisitely coloured, through a medium whereby she was distorted, blurred, and coarsely daubed.

## CHAPTER XIX.

ELAINE was sitting with her mother-in-law. They were in the morning-room, where Mrs. Everton did her knitting—shawls for the old women of the parish ; comforters for the old men ; petticoats for the children ; and mufflers for the deep-sea fishermen in the North Sea. Elaine, who hated needlework, made a heroic reach after the higher mysteries of art-embroidery ; and as she was one of those gifted women who can do whatever they have a mind to do, she really did turn out most creditable work, which she knew counted for grace with her Philistine connexions.

Had they but known how she hated the whole thing, and what an effort it was to sit there outlining tulips and poppies on coarse linen for art bed-covers! Had they but known how in her heart, as she sat there, serene, beautiful, complaisante, she was revolving her losses and gains, and wondering whether she had not bought sufficiency and security too dearly! If Mrs. Everton could but have taken off that golden shining cover, and seen the hell-broth boiling within! But we are nearly as blind as new-born puppies, and the sharpest-sighted among us fail to see the two and two which make four, unless written on the signboard before our eyes; while the less sharp-sighted—the dim-eyed, and the myopic—good Lord! they do not see even that!

Sitting there, doing her *corvée* as grace-

fully as if it were pleasure, the servant brought her a note. It was from Percy Merritt, demanding rather than beseeching an interview in a certain secluded spot in the park which not even the gamekeepers were wont to frequent. If she did not consent to this, said the letter, he, Percy Merritt, would come and thunder at the gates and claim her as his own before the whole family of her persecutors. In spite of herself he would rescue her from the clutches of those who did not know how to value her.

For a moment Elaine's heart stood still—Mrs. Everton's calm eyes turned on her with unmistakeable suspicion and curiosity.

‘Who is your correspondent, Elaine?’ she asked; for private notes to Elaine were rarities, and mothers-in-law of Mrs. Everton's

type do not accord much liberty to their sons' fair-faced wives.

Elaine put on her frankest smile.

'It is from my poor poet, Percy Merritt,' she said; thinking so much of the truth better than a completed fiction. 'He has been consulting me about his work and I have been able to help him with certain things. That is all, Mummy dear.'

'It is not a very prudent position to adopt,' said Mrs. Everton with displeasure.

'Oh, a woman like myself can be of much use to young and ignorant men,' said Elaine with seraphic unconsciousness of evil.

'In country places in England we do not do such things,' said Aston's mother with yet more displeasure. 'Young wives in England do not make themselves the confidential advisers of young men.'

‘Well, Mummy dear, I will not if you do not like it,’ said Elaine with the sweetest frankest surrender. ‘See here, I will write this’—here she read as if writing—‘“Dear Mr. Merritt—I have no time to give to the perusal of your manuscript, for which I wish all imaginable success. Faithfully yours, Elaine Everton.”’

What she did write was: ‘If possible at about half-past three I will be there.’

This she carefully sealed—no trusting to gummed envelopes for Elaine!—and gave to the servant; Mrs. Everton murmuring contentedly :

‘That is far better, my dear.’

Then Elaine came back to her place and took up her work, her sweet face as calm and undisturbed as if that hell-broth were not boiling in her heart.

Percy Merritt frightened her. So indeed did Martin, whose intense despair so often suggested suicide, which would set Dulcie free to denounce her as the cause. But Percy Merritt terrified her because of his unreasonableness. He was like some elemental force which she had unwittingly released and could not now control—like the torrent of which she had lifted the sluice-gate. She had never had such an one to deal with. It was as if she had caressed a cat and found a tiger.

‘That comes of dealing with men who are not gentlemen,’ she said to herself, disdaining his poor virtues as such women do when the signals are set against them. ‘It is my own fault. I should never have touched such trash.’

She knew the signs—none better! Keen-

witted and cold-hearted, no pity for the lives she had wrecked distracted her from her main object when things came to a crisis. And that main object was her own safety. She was fully alive to the dangers of her present moment and how difficult safe-steering had become. She was conscious of the change in Mrs. Everton, and knew that she, at least, would be on the alert. And she could gauge the headlong nature of this man who was not a gentleman, now that his passions were roused and his convictions were immovable. This fool—this Percy Merritt—would make no terms with conventional propriety, and the stoutest cart-ropes ever twisted by prudence would be to him as so much tow or a loose plait of rotten straw. Between the two she was caught in the narrowest part of the fork : but she must brave the possible sus-

picion of her mother-in-law and go out to meet this mad lover, else she knew that he would come here, drunk with love and frantic with despair, creating a scene and a scandal which would betray all. She must, let what would betide, evade the vigilance of Aston's mother, to soothe this tame cat become a tiger, and so save herself from destruction. And might the stars in their courses fight for her!

It was a lovely autumn day. Nature was in one of her happiest moods, as though the Gods were walking over the face of the earth and the river-nymphs were floating in the streams. It was a day which discounts sorrow as though it had never been since Adam named the beasts in Paradise and Eve brought him the choicest fruits in her hand. It was not a day for the tragedy of love, but for its joyousness, its splendour. Yet it was

the day when Elaine was to meet Percy Merritt, dealing him his death-blow—standing by, watching his agony.

Fortunately—was it fortunately?—Mrs. Everton was not very well that day. She had taken a little cold and could not go out. Elaine declined the carriage and said she would walk in the park. Aston and his father were on magisterial business in the county town, and Elaine was free for the afternoon.

‘The day is so lovely! I would rather have a little walk, Mummy dear, if you don’t mind. I have had so little walking exercise lately.’

She said this in her sweet and gentle way, giving the distinct intimation of her own wish but also as distinctly her readiness to suppress herself if need be and ‘Mummy’ objected.

‘Yes, do,’ said Mrs. Everton.

‘You will not be dull, darling?’ Elaine asked caressingly.

‘Not at all—not in the least,’ said Mrs. Everton with self-betraying briskness.

She was really glad to get rid of her lovely daughter-in-law, at least for a time. Slow to conceive suspicion, she was one of those whose thoughts grow by brooding, and who end by exaggerating that which in the beginning they rejected as too monstrous for belief. And now that she had set up a doubt of Elaine, she began to dread and dislike her with more strength and breadth than was perhaps justifiable.

‘Then I will take a little walk,’ said Elaine as if she had received a permission without which she would not have gone. ‘I shall not be long, and shall keep just about the

grounds,' she added, kissing Mrs. Everton's hand.

'Don't hurry. A brisk long walk will do you good,' said Mrs. Everton. 'And I am never dull alone,' she added, to soften the rather crude note struck in these hasty words.

Elaine said no more. She had the wisdom of reticence and the gift of reserve. She saw and understood, but it was not her policy to declare. With one of her loveliest smiles, looking back at the door, she glided gracefully out of the room, and soon was on the broad walk that led into the park. In a few minutes she was out of sight of the house, when, striking across the grass, she made for a little thicket which skirted the lane and effectually concealed anyone who was within its shelter.

And, in going, she scattered as a trail the

petals of the late-blooming roses which she wore on her bosom.

Dulcie was driving over to see her mother. As she went by the lane, just about the same place as that where Mrs. Everton had seen Percy Merritt some few days ago, slouching along like a denuded beggar, she also passed him, walking with long strides and uncertain steps, his head held high, talking and muttering to himself as he went. Never to the day of her death did she know what impulse possessed her. Some distance farther on was a park stile, which led by a cross cut up to the Hall; from which, a few hundred yards conducted to the little wood. By some unaccountable freak of fancy, Dulcie stopped her carriage, got out, and walked across the grass to her old home. It was a lovely day, and the autumnal tints were glorious. The

air was crisp, yet full of balm and woodland scents. It was an ideal day for a walk and the impulse overpowered her. As she went on she met Elaine. Escape for either was impossible, and they had to front each other as they met, face to face in the open.

Then a sudden revelation came to Dulcie and she knew all.

‘My stalwart sister-in-law, with her *pas de grenadier*!’ sneered Elaine as they met.

Subterfuge or pretence between them when they were alone together, was unnecessary.

‘What are you doing here? Who are you going to meet?’ asked Dulcie, her darkened eyes flaming.

‘Well! a few crows,’ said Elaine; ‘perhaps a pheasant or two, perhaps a rabbit. I really don’t know what else, my inquisitorial sister-in-law.’

‘You are going to meet Percy Merritt,’ flashed out Dulcie.

‘Vrai?’ laughed Elaine. ‘What a good soothsayer you would make, my breezy, blunt and ill-dressed sister-in-law. Soit! Percy Merritt then let it be.’

‘Are you a woman at all, or are you a fiend incarnate?’ cried Dulcie.

‘A woman, my dear—a very woman—every inch of me, Woman; and a charming one, my clumsy, blunt and ill-dressed sister-in-law—which is more than I can say for you; for I don’t think I have ever seen one who has less charm than Mr. Martin Harrowby’s wife.’

‘And for you, the thing you are—the thing which we honest women shudder to name and refuse to associate with—honourable men lose their very souls and go down

to perdition for the sake of your horrible love.'

'Just so,' smiled Elaine. 'You see we have charm, and you, poor virtuous dowdies have none. It is all as plain as A B C, my virtuous Dulcie. Be content with what you have—your virtue—of which, *par parenthèse*, no one wants to deprive you—and leave US, the women who rule the world, our charm, our grace, our sceptre of sovereignty, and the love of the men whose names you bear, *vous autres*, and whose hearts you cannot win! I advise you,' she said, suddenly changing her mocking manner to one of menace and ferocity, 'not to cross swords with me, Dulcie Harrowby. If you do! as God lives you shall repent it. Do you think my path in life is to be hindered by such a worm as you? La! la! la! *quel farce!*' she added,

going back on the manner which suggested Pirouette at a *bal d'Opéra*, with 'Ho là Folie! la belle Folie!' as the refrain of the song sung between the *entrechats* of the cancan.

Then she turned away and left Dulcie, as she said to herself, *écrasée*. But Dulcie was by no means *écrasée*; and her own thought was: 'How can I unmask this fiend without causing a scandal, and so doing more harm than good?'

As she came out of the park into the broad walk of the garden, she met her husband at the gate. He was standing there, pale and haggard, feverishly scanning the horizon, looking—searching—as indeed he was, looking for Elaine, who Mrs. Everton told him had gone into the garden. He had not found her in the garden, and now he was

scanning the park. When Dulcie came up he gave a little shudder. This was not the gracious presence he desired—this was the stone given for bread—the cockatrice for the nightingale. Poor Dulcie !

‘Where have you been ? Why are you walking ?’ he said harshly.

Something of unutterable scorn came into Dulcie’s face, but she answered quite quietly : ‘ I walked across from the stile. If you are looking for Elaine,’ she continued in the same quiet indifferent manner, ‘ you will find her not far from the stile. You can trace her by rose-leaves—a trail of rose-leaves,’ she repeated with a curious intonation.

On which she went through the gate and up the broad walk to the house, while Martin, by now shameless so far as his wife was con-

cerned, set off at a swinging pace—tracking Elaine by the rose-leaves she had scattered as she went.

Meanwhile, Elaine had gained the thicket, where she found Percy Merritt waiting for her—the very impersonation of livid grief and broken-hearted despair.

She did not allow him to begin the attack. She knew too well the value of the first word.

‘How could you be so imprudent as to send me that note!’ she cried in extreme displeasure, before he could speak. ‘Fortunately Mrs. Everton was not able to go out to-day, and my husband and Mr. Everton were away, else I could not have come. And, ungovernable madman as you are, you might perhaps have carried out your threat, and come up to the house to make a scandal and a scene.’

‘I should have done so,’ said Percy, folding his arms.

Underneath all the desperate tragedy of his mood the underbred man’s histrionic vanity made itself visible.

She shrugged her shapely shoulders.

‘To what good?’ she cried disdainfully. ‘When you have made a scene how much nearer will you be? Besides—Gentlemen never make scenes,’ she said emphatically.

‘Lovers do,’ said Percy.

‘What is it that you want, maniac that you are!’ said Elaine—all flattering softness, all caressing blandishment gone, and only hardness and displeasure left.

‘Your truth—your whole-heartedness—your honourable action,’ said Percy with a certain stilted inflation that jarred on the

woman, whose perceptions were as delicate and refined as her soul was corrupt.

‘As how, pray?’

‘Your coming to me openly.’

She laughed unpleasantly.

‘To my destruction?’ she said.

‘To the destruction of shame and falsehood, and the acknowledgment of love and truth,’ said Percy.

‘Did I ever promise anything so suicidal?’ she asked. ‘Did I ever hint at such mad and wicked folly? Running off with *you*!’ she added, accentuating her disdain.

‘It is the only logical conclusion to this affair,’ said Percy with dangerous calmness. His hand was thrust into his breast pocket, and he fingered something feverishly. ‘If you love me as you have told me you do, and allowed me to love you—allowed and en-

couraged—you have but one course open to you as an honourable woman—Elaine. You ought to come and live with me openly before the face of the world, completing in the eyes of men the union made in the heart of God! Your living with any other man is an infamy—a blasphemy.'

He was working himself up into the frenzy of a weak man who loves beyond reason, is both reckless and sincere, and who begins to feel himself baffled, with the dread suspicion forming itself in his mind that he has been played with and deceived.

'You do not seem to understand the usages of society or the principles of social morals,' she said.

'I do not understand half-heartedness,' he said; 'or that the woman who is mine by the laws of God should be another man's wife

by those of the world ! With me it is all or nothing.'

'So be it,' she said, catching at the straw and making for the loophole. 'I agree with you—all or nothing. So let it be nothing.'

'Elaine !'

His cry of anguish carried as far as the scream of a wounded bird.

'I forbid you to call me by that name,' said Elaine haughtily. 'I only regret my passing weakness in that I ever thought I could make you a friend, a confidant, a sympathizer.'

'How have I failed you ?' he cried.

'You are failing me now,' she answered. 'What Gentleman would act as you are acting ? And I thought you were a Gentleman,' she said, looking him up and down with that kind of scorn which is like so much molten

lead on the heart—so much vitriol thrown into the face.

For a moment she thought she had conquered in this perilous duel between them, for, overcome by her manner, he flung himself on his knees before her, grovelling like a beaten slave. This was as it should be. This was her idea of the fitness of things between herself and her victims. She to reign and they to suffer—and to glory in their pain like the martyrs of old. For, indeed, are not women supreme in power and beauty? and if women as a race, what then ought she to be, queen of the queens as she was?

‘Rather than fail you, I would die!’ he said, in broken accents.

‘You must do neither,’ she returned, more gently than she had spoken before. ‘You must remember my position, Percy, and be

brave and unselfish. I cannot fly in the face of all social order. I am not of the stuff of which heroines are made. I love you, as I said ; but I must renounce you, and you must renounce me. I put it to you as a man of honour—as my *lover* !’

He grovelled lower and lower, still weeping noisily, kissing the hem of her garment, writhing in his agony.

She looked at him with ineffable contempt. Had he been picturesque in his grief, she would have admired him ; as it was, she loathed him. Nevertheless, she temporized.

‘ Poor broken love !’ she said tenderly. ‘ What you feel, I also feel. But the Fates are inexorable, and we must bow to their decree.’

She looked so infinitely beautiful as she said this, that the hot blood surged up in his

heart, and the madness of the moment overcame him. A kind of demoniacal rage possessed him. Not for him, she should be no other man's ! She loved him—or was she a beautiful lie who had lured him to his ruin for the sake of her own vanity only ? What mattered ? Loving him, they should die together ! A fraud, she should beguile no other man as she had beguiled him !

His hand clutched that thing in his breast, and before the white, stern face of Martin Harrowby could break through the intervening branches, he had lodged one bullet in this false, fair woman's heart, and another in his own brain.

## CHAPTER XX.

NEVER since the first wattled hut had been raised on the site of the present pleasant little town of Green Lanes had there been such an awful stirring of the depths as was made by this fearful tragedy. And the mystery of it! What did it mean? How had it come about? Those two dead bodies lying stark among the falling leaves and crisp bronzed bracken of the little thicket—Elaine shot through the heart, Percy Merritt through the head—and Martin Harrowby, who gave the alarm, unable (or unwilling) to explain :—was not this occasion for conjecture to wander

far and wide over the boundless realms of possibility ?

What could have brought them all together to that silent and secluded spot ? And why should Percy have shot the fair wife of Aston Everton, as it was evident he had done, before putting the pistol into his own mouth and blowing out the miserable scantling of brains he had ? Why, indeed !

If Dulcie and Martin both knew the truth, and a few keen-witted cynics were not ashamed to suspect something very like it, more went wide of the mark, and the thing threatened to become legendary while still a matter of yesterday's history. It does not come into the everyday experience of those who live in quiet country places to have among them a beautiful young woman who, happily married to the best match of the district, and not

much more than a full year's wife, flings herself into an intrigue with one who is regarded by the gentry of the place as an innocuous inferior, rather than as their equal in brains or breeding. The thing was too monstrous to be generally believed—to be even generally suspected; and the generous and charitable sought for all sorts of solutions to avoid this, the most inexplicable, if also the most apparent.

To Aston—always under the spell—that Elaine had consented to aught—to the interview to start with, or to anything that this might seem to imply—was something as impossible to conceive as that his mother should have committed murder, or his father been guilty of felony. Even when he heard the incident of the letter, to which Mrs. Everton herself now attached a special meaning—even then he did not falter in his

faith, nor admit the faintest shadow of suspicion against his dear dead love. His idea was fixed and clear :—that miserable hound had been taken with a fit of madness ; his vanity had been wounded by Elaine's refusal to read his worthless trash ; he had met her walking alone—by some cunning artifice had lured her into the thicket—and there had perpetrated the crime which might well make the very gods weep in heaven. Mad as he must have been — this self-crowned poet crazed with vanity or worse—the man whose life he had wrecked had no pity for him. Could he have been brought to life again, Aston would have hanged him, maniac as he might be. No physiological cause could excuse such a piece of pure devilry. As well excuse Satan himself, and soothe him with anodynes and nepenthe !

Would that he could find these for himself! The fire which burnt into his very life was worse than that which consumes sinful souls in hell. All that man could feel of despair for loss—of jealous wrath that another should perhaps have dared lift his eyes to the sacred shrine wherein he had set his peerless queen—of impotent desire for an impossible vengeance—of impotent wrath against fate—all that human nature could suffer and yet retain both reason and consciousness, Aston now felt when his beautiful Beloved lay dead in his arms, and no word of his, no tenderness, no caress, could bring her back to life. Pure, sweet, perfect in all womanly grace she had been to him in her life, and all this she was now in even greater intensity:—she whom a madman had destroyed—a madman far more criminal than those who had burnt

the temples of the gods and shattered the priceless works of man.

And the thicket kept its secret of the reason why ; as did also Martin and Dulcie.

It had been the vengeance of Fate, as we so often see in life. The mills of God had ground slowly, but they had ground exceeding small. By the meanest of her many victims she had suffered—by the hand of the most contemptible, her righteous punishment had been meted out to her. She had confronted apparently greater dangers than this, and had come out unscathed and triumphant. Here, in this remote spot, she had been worsted by a very worm among men ; learning, when too late, that unheeded lesson of how often we are punished for our greater sins by falling over the stone of a lesser offence.

‘Not a gentleman.’

Had Elaine’s pride not stooped so low as to Percy Merritt—had she been content with what she had, and found it enough for her vanity to run the dangerous curricula of Martin and her husband without adding a third, she would have gone on for all time in substantial safety and apparent respectability. But she would not be satisfied, and so came to the grief that is inevitable, when a woman goes out of her sphere and adventures herself in the strange walks of social inferiority. It was the last fatal commentary made by justice on her evil life; and Percy Merritt of Green Lanes avenged the wrecked lives and broken hearts of the better men who had preceded him.

Years passed, and life at Green Lanes had flowed quietly and silently into new channels.

Less tenacious and more expansive than Martin, Aston had fulfilled his original destiny and married Ida Grantley, to the grand content of all concerned. By his father's death he had become the owner of the estate, and his marriage was a social obligation. And as he was of an affectionate disposition, with that kind of practical philosophy which contents itself with the best it can get, he made a good husband to a loving wife, for all that the memory of Elaine always remained as the Incomparable—the Supreme.

Things at Hayes Hill had not much changed between Martin and Dulcie; and the essential severance there was as complete as ever. She had nursed him carefully in the long illness that had followed on Elaine's murder; and she had administered

his estate with tact and judgment during the two useless years that had ensued after his recovery, for the complete re-establishment of his health and nerves. But now, when he had returned home, the old rift between them gaped as wide as before.

All love for him had died out of her breast. She despised him for his blindness ; she loathed his treachery, his faithlessness, his falsehood, his sin—and loathing what he had done she included him as he was. From a careless and unsuspecting girl she had become a reticent, self-controlled and clear-sighted woman. From a girl who believed in the absolute certainty of a man's love for the wife he had voluntarily chosen and was bound to respect, she had become a disbeliever in the truth of all men and the sincerity of most women. Her very virtue was making her

hard and narrow ; not malicious, not mean, but hard, sceptical, unloving. By suffering she had come to knowledge ; and this knowledge threatened to encrust her very heart, as her stern sense of right threatened to freeze for ever the grace of love.

This was her danger ; and for this there seemed no remedy.

Silent, apart, virtually dead to each other, the life they led was little better than a living death, till one day, when Martin was leaning back in his chair, half asleep—she watching him—something seemed to give way in her heart. It was like the breaking up of the ice and the letting forth of the imprisoned waters. Suddenly, like church bells calling the faithful to prayer, broke out in her ears the words ‘Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us!’ Who was

she to condemn so harshly and to sit in judgment so severely? Was she absolutely sinless in the sight of God? If not this sin, then some other—surely, some other—she had committed! Was *this* the only unforgivable offence?—while her own more secret transgressions remained for ever unpunished?

And if he had sinned, he had also suffered. Dear God! how he had suffered! Was not that to be taken into the account? Love him again, she never could; but pity him—forgive him—do something towards softening the hard outlines of the Duty which was the sole thing she now gave him;—yes, that she could do—that she ought to do. Who should forgive if women do not?—who should pity rather than condemn, if it be not women?

Gently, quietly, she went up to her husband and took his hand.

‘My poor friend!’ she said tenderly; ‘I know how much you have suffered, and I feel for you.’

She stooped her pale drawn face and her quivering lips touched his forehead. The bands of iron were burst asunder; the thick-ribbed ice had melted; pity for the sinner softened if it did not obliterate hatred for the sin; and the evolution of Dulcie Everton was complete.

From the glad innocence of girlhood she had passed into the painful knowledge of evil. From self-unconsciousness she had developed self-reliance and the spiritual loneliness this engenders. And now, from the hard and narrow repudiation of the pure woman, when associated with sin, she had

wakened to the nobler creed of Pity and Forgiveness, for the sake of God's dear Charity and the divine healing of sin and sorrow to be found in human Love.

THE END.













